

LEADING



MARCH 15¢

20 cents in Canada

WESTERN L.N.



RAINBOW EXPRESS

by *Giff Cheshire*

OUTGUESS THE WEATHERMAN

AMAZING FORECASTER

PREDICTS THE WEATHER
24 HOURS IN ADVANCE



READ ALL ABOUT THE
"SWISS" WEATHER HOUSE
AND **FREE** GIFT OFFER
IF YOU ACT AT ONCE

**NOW YOU CAN
BE YOUR OWN
WEATHERMAN!**

Why pay
\$5 or \$10
for a barom-
eter when you
can predict the
weather yourself,
at home, 5 to 24

hours in advance, with this accurate, inexpensive Weather House forecaster? It's made like a little Swiss cottage, with a thatched green roof and small green shutters. Inside the house is an old witch and a little boy and girl. When the weather's going to be fine, the little boy and girl come out in front. But when bad weather is on the way the old witch makes an appearance. There is an easy-to-read thermometer on the front of the cottage that shows you the exact temperature . . . Here is positively the most amazing introductory advertising offer ever made. But you must act quickly—prices may rise.

FREE
for Prompt
Action

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The greatest novelty
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Tradition is—a person
owning one of these
plants will have much
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Almost every day of your life is affected in some way by the weather, and it's such a satisfaction to have a reliable indication of what the weather will be. With the "Swiss" Weather House made in the U. S. A. and easy-to-read thermometer you have an investment in comfort and convenience for years to come. The Weather House comes to you complete and ready to use. Ideal for gifts and bridge prizes. It will bring new pleasure to everyone in your family. The price is only \$1.69 C. O. D. You must act now to secure this price.

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Chicago, Illinois

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Send at once (1) "Swiss" Weather House. On arrival I will pay postman \$1.69 plus postage with the understanding that the Weather House is guaranteed to work accurately. Also I can return the Weather House for any reason within 10 days and get my money back.

☐ Send C. O. D. ☐ I enclose \$1.69. You Pay Postage.

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City State

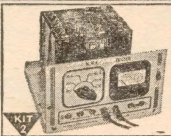


I Will Show You How to Learn RADIO by Practicing in Spare Time

**I Send You
6 Big Kits
of Radio Parts**



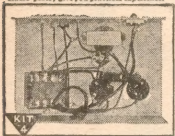
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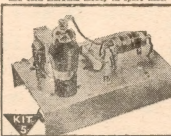
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Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts 1 and 2. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



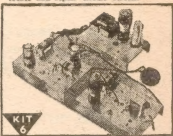
KIT 3
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4
You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



KIT 5
Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



KIT 6
You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

KNOW RADIO—Win Success I Will Train You at Home—SAMPLE LESSON FREE

Send coupon for FREE Sample Lesson, "Getting Acquainted with Receiver Servicing," and FREE 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." See how N.R.I. trains you at home. Read how you practice building, testing, repairing Radios with SIX BIG KITS of Radio parts I send you.

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Mail me FREE your sample lesson and 64-page book. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

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My Course Includes Training in
TELEVISION-ELECTRONICS

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LEADING

WESTERN



March, 1946

Vol. 2, No. 1

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Young Lex Quigley, who ran a treasure express from the gold fields, found himself involved in a peculiar setup of thievery and murder—and more than courage and good fortune would be needed to get him out of it!



Complete Top-hand Novelette

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LEADING WESTERN is published monthly by Trojan Publishing Corp., 29 Worthington St., Springfield 3, Massachusetts. Editorial Office at 125 East 45th Street, New York 17, New York. Frank Armer, Publisher. W. H. Matthews, Editorial Director. E. W. Hutchinson, Managing Editor. Robert Gwinn, Editor. Entered as second-class matter November 13, 1945, at the Post Office at Springfield, Mass., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions, yearly \$4.50, single copy 15c. Canadian and foreign postage extra. Manuscripts should be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope, and are submitted at the author's risk. Copyright, 1946, by Trojan Publishing Corp.

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Spanish

Name..... Age..... Home Address.....
City..... State..... Position..... Hours..... A.M. to..... P.M.

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Plumb Ornerly Ants

MANY STORIES and articles have been written about the "army ants" of Africa and the voracious red ants of South America—those fearful and fearsome insects which travel in untold millions, devouring every living thing, both animal and vegetable, that may lay in their path. Explorers of uncharted jungles have frequently reported discovering the evidences of these marching ant armies, from which even such brave beasts as the lion, the elephant and the leopard will flee in terror.

When on the march, army ants observe perfect military discipline and refuse to swerve around any obstacle. They move in a straight line from their starting place to their destination, and often a billion-ant horde will require a full day to pass a given spot. In their wake they leave the skeletons of animals ranging in size from rats to rhinos which they have killed and picked clean of every vestige of flesh; and, further to mark their passage, their path is beaten down to a width of three or four feet, as hard and flat as a cement sidewalk. No grass, no leaf, not a trace of vegetation remains after the marching insects have gone on.

But while these jungle marchers are well known to layman and scientist alike, less is heard of the South American tree-ant, which infests certain varieties of the palisanto tree. Nests or hives of these ants will take over and kill a tree, using its decaying trunk for a home; and woe betide the living thing which may come into contact with that innocent-appearing trunk! For the tree-ant, while black and voracious, is almost microscopically small and unbelievably fast in motion; so that the victim is hardly aware of attack

until he is covered by literally millions of the insects.

Then it is too late for salvation. The bite of a single midget ant is excruciatingly painful; when multiplied by millions, the agony is said to be comparable only to the shock of a thousand volts of electricity at high amperage. Death follows almost instantaneously; and the corpse of a man or the carcass of a large animal will be eaten down to a skeleton within an hour or so—as swiftly as a school of piranha fish can devour a horse unlucky enough to fall into an infested stream.

AMONG certain South American jungle tribes, the palisanto tree-ant is sometimes employed as a method of execution for maidens and wives who have transgressed against the moral laws. When a savage discovers his wife or daughter with an admirer, he binds her to an infested tree. Within a few hours, there is nothing but a pile of clean bones to indicate that the woman ever existed.

Other Indian tribesmen use the tree-ants as a test of youthful courage. Before a young man can become a full-fledge warrior, he is compelled to thrust his hand elbow-deep into a hollow length of bamboo in which not more than half a dozen ants have been captured. Should he wince or cry out in agony under their ferocious bites, he is debarred from participation in the men's councils. But if he comes through the horrible ordeal without showing any evidence of fear or pain, he is accepted as a warrior.

Yes, some ants are as mean as the toughest Western badman!

In next month's **LEADING WESTERN** —

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A great novelette by Giff Cheshire

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"A GOOD JOB IN RADIO & TELEVISION BROADCASTING"



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My training will give you the broad, fundamental principles so necessary as a background, no matter which branch of Radio you wish to specialize in. I make it easy for you to learn Radio Repairs and Installation Work. I teach you how to install and repair Electronic Equipment. In fact, you'll be a fully qualified RADIO-ELECTRONICIAN, equipped with the skill and knowledge to perform efficiently and to make a wonderful success of yourself.

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The very same Radio Parts I supply with your Course for gaining experience in Radio Repair work may be adapted through an exclusive Sprayberry wiring procedure to serve for complete, fast, accurate Radio Receiver trouble-shooting. Thus, under Sprayberry methods, you do not have one

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"Since last week I fixed 7 radios, all good-paying jobs and right now I am working on an amplifier system. This job alone will net me about \$26.00. As long as my work keeps coming in this way, I have only one word to say and that is, 'Thanks to my Sprayberry training' and I am not afraid to boast about it." — ADRIEN BENJAMIN, North Greenvalle, Conn.

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Name Age

Address

City State

(Mail in plain envelope or paste on penny postcard)

When answering advertisements please mention SPEED FICTION GROUP

RAINBOW EXPRESS

By GIFF CHESHIRE

THE mule plodded patiently to the lower end of the hot, twisting street of Placerville, California. The man leading it walked erect until he reached the office of the Quigley Express, where he halted to stare at the two men seated on crude three-legged stools before a squat log structure.

"Is this more of your work, Lex Quigley?" he demanded.

Lex Quigley was a big man, and young, wearing a flat-brimmed beaver and a wrinkled and worn frock coat, and unlike the other two he kept his bronzed, craggy face clean-shaven. He stared for a moment at the mule's lifeless burden.

"It's Frank Fulton!" he said softly.

"A surprise to you, Quigley?"

Quigley nodded. "Why shouldn't it be? What happened, Havasa?"

Tony Havasa ran treasure express for the rival Fulton organization, and now he let brooding eyes play on his dead employer. "I'm not so sure you don't



When an attempt is made to cover up murder as well as thievery, the motive is certain to be mighty important. . . .

already know all about it, Quigley! But this is all I know. Frank Fulton went up the North Fork of the American. Then he came over the ridge to the South Fork, heading for Hangtown, here. I come along a day behind him. I found him on the ridge trail. He'd been shot in the back. He'd picked up better than four thousand in dust along the way, and it was gone."

Quigley strode forward, his lips pinched grimly. "He wouldn't be the first runner that got himself robbed and murdered, Havasa. I'm making a living running express in the gold fields, just like Frank Fulton did. I don't need to resort to such as this."

Lex rose to greet the approaching man.



Havasa picked up the reins and started on, then paused. "I ain't forgetting the ruckus you and Fulton had when you come to invade the north. I ain't forgetting Fulton threatened to keep you out with guns, if necessary—that you threatened to come in the same way, if you had to!"

Then he left.

Quigley turned back to Derby Duncan, who had not lifted his thin, dapper body from the camp stool, and who now was faintly grinning. Duncan was Quigley's head man on this American River run. Now he said:

"Anyhow, you're rid of Frank Fulton!"

Lex Quigley nodded thoughtfully, not liking the man's light, cynical tone. "Some riff-raff from below pulled that, likely. But Havasa was pretty quick to blame it on the QE. I don't like it, Derby. I don't like the looks of things!"

The Quigley express office here in Hangtown—currently striving to attain dignity by changing its name to Placerville—was a small dugout covered by a rough, chinked-log building with a slab roof. Just inside the door was a short counter, one end of which rested on an empty flour barrel and which supported a large torsion scale for weighing dust. Behind it stood a pigeon rack where incoming and outgoing letters were sorted, and under this was a small iron safe. Concealed by these were the small stove, table and bed that furnished Derby Duncan his living accommodations. Duncan had sent for Lex because only a few nights before somebody had tried to burn down the office.

LEX turned his eyes back toward the town that stepped up the hill above him. This was a typical gold camp, a hodgepodge of small, plainly rectangular buildings of light lumber and canvas, with a few large and ugly structures housing business establishments. A plain, bare hill rolled to his right, while straight ahead was a lower knoll thinly covered by spruce. It was a town of men, and a special variety of men, the ar-

gonauts who had streamed from east and south and north to plunder the goldstreams dipping into the Sacramento-San Joaquin river system from the high Sierras.

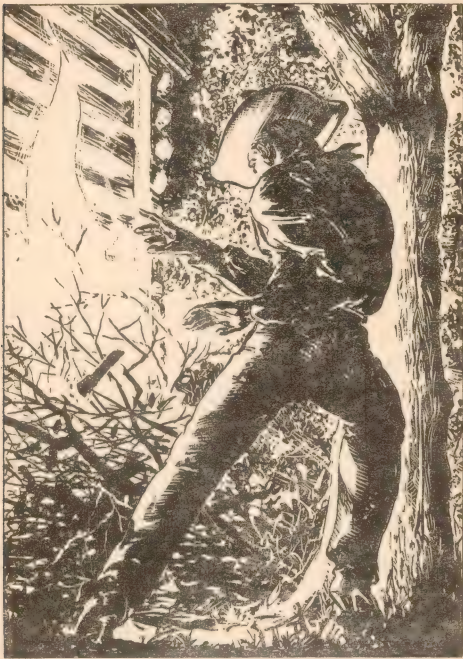
Ordinarily it was a rich and colorful and exciting scene to which Lex Quigley thrilled, yet there were moments as now when the grim ugliness of it showed through, and he felt himself momentarily disturbed. When prizes were so rich, the lust of men grew great, and lust was never a pretty thing.

Abruptly Lex said, "I'm on my way. Smithson'll be in on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, after this. It'll be up to you to see that the stuff keeps moving from here to the outcamps, come hell or high water. Keep your eyes open. There's apt to be more dirty work." With a nod, he strolled up the street.

For the next few hours, Lex Quigley followed by horseback the rough, hoof-cut trail that skirted the south fork of the American. Reaching Mamma Dople's tavern and landing just at dusk, he put up for the night, his depression still heavily upon him.

It was going wrong, all wrong, this venture that had seemed so promising at the start. It was beautiful country, a vast, incredibly rich lode that stretched nearly one hundred eighty miles north and south, a land of fat hills, of rough, pine-studded ridges, green slopes and glades, blunt cliffs and yawning canyons. Gold was everywhere, on the Bear, the Feather, the American, the Cosumnes, the Mokelumne and other to northward, and on the Calaveras and Stanislaus and Tuolumne and Merced, to the south. The new, raw town of San Francisco was the brain and heart of this vast, breathless operation, on the bay where the Sacramento-San Joaquin systems linked. The towns of Sacramento and Stockton served as immediate sub-bases, while such outpost towns as Oroville, Marysville, Placerville, Tuolumne and Mariposa brought a semblance of civilization to the actual digging operations.

Already there were better than a



Somebody piled brush at the back of the shanty and torched it.

hundred camps scattered throughout this region, rough and aggressive towns built and named by rough and aggressive men whose bluntness was saved by

the salt of lively humor. Stretched in this region below the rugged, oreless granite lifts of the Sierras proper were camps. On the outskirts of the camps

were the ditches and flumes, the gold pans and rockers and long toms, and the mining men with their picks and shovels and their exalted expectancies.

Lex Quigley had sailed down the eastern coast of the United States to the Isthmus of Darien, crossed that hot, dank, disease-ridden strip of continent, then changed to sea again to come up the west coast to San Francisco. He had found it a place where men compressed the progress of a normal lifetime into months and weeks and even days, and this had engendered within himself the same hot, impatient spirit, an unconscious thirst for personal grandeur.

There had been many a man ahead of him who had quickly seen that the miner with his muscles and crude tools and grandiose dreams was the least clever and most hapless of this congregated mass of humanity. The miner prowled and probed and sweat and swore and he met defeat more often than he found what he sought. There was another class of men, the brainy ones, their dreams backed by schemes, with a talent for organization and service and executive exploitation. Theirs was the easier search. Among these Lex Quigley found his true place instinctively.

A number of express services had already been started. There were few post offices as yet in California, one at San Francisco where the ocean steamers put in and a few others poorly spotted by a remote and ill-informed federal government. The tens of thousands who poured to the gold coast had left the major segment of their lives and hearts behind. So mail from home was nearly worth its weight in gold, and in the outer camps men willingly paid a thimbleful of gold dust for the delivery of a single letter.

It was this opportunity that the expressmen rose to meet. They coursed the gold bearing streams, compiling long lists of clients and charged a dollar for the entry of a name. Thereafter they faithfully met the Pacific Mail steamers coming into the Bay. They bought up old copies of eastern newspapers and

they collected their clients' mail. Then began the races to the interior, up the Sacramento and San Joaquin by steamer and often onto the foaming lesser rivers, and onward by horse and afoot as conditions demanded, until the express circuits were covered. On an express runner's despatch depended his prosperity, and for this and his regularity he was richly repaid, up to eight dollars for a letter, four to six dollars each for the stale and frayed newspapers. On his outward trips he was burdened with pokes of gold dust, to be deposited in the nearest dust bank, which institutions also were run by the expressmen, and sundry personal errands for which a fitting fee was exacted.

LEX Quigley had scouted the country. Then he had started running up the San Joaquin to Stockton. An enterprising man, he had quickly organized other runs, out of Stockton, hiring less progressive runners to work for him. In the end, his express service had become a network that dominated the southern diggings.

Restlessness, which now had to be fed on constant movement and expansion, soon turned Lex's attention to the northern fields. He had moved in, basing this extension on Sacramento, and opening circuits to the Feather River region, up the American and the foaming Yuba, and criss-crossing the hinterland. He kept runners moving continually on the steamers running between San Francisco and the intermediate bases of Sacramento and Stockton, where letters, parcels, papers and pokes moved on the relays between there and the outcamps.

The profits had been incredibly handsome, but not without a toll. The northern expressmen had protested hotly against his invasion of that territory. Of these had been Frank Fulton, now murdered on the trails.

The Fulton Express, which worked directly out of San Francisco, had been the biggest outfit in the north, but confining its operations to the stretches between Sacramento and the American

River mines, and Fulton had possessed an explosive temper. The argument to which Tony Havasa had referred had occurred between Quigley and Fulton in Sacramento a month before. Fulton had warned Lex Quigley that he was poaching in occupied territory, and reckless threats and counterthreats had ensued.

As he washed for supper at Mamma Dople's trail tavern, Lex Quigley knew that many another beside Tony Havasa was going to wonder if Fulton's death had grown out of that quarrel. It would bring the northern express war to white heat, which would be bad enough. Yet deep in Quigley's mind was another concern. Frank Fulton had a daughter, a beautiful and slender brunette whom Lex had met only a few evenings before the bitter quarrel with her father. Now he wondered what the effects of this further development would be on Connie Fulton, and he found that the curiosity filled him with a strangely disturbing worry.

Yes, a man could help destiny get him into complex troubles.

CHAPTER II

MAMMA DOPLET had opened her chinked-log tavern and river landing a couple of years before, and passersby on the American regularly made it an overnight stopping point. There were several others there that evening, Lex found when he emerged from his room for supper, most of them miners coming in or going out, but his eyes widened with interest when he noted Jud Clement.

Clement was already eating at the family style table in the dining room when Lex came in and took his seat. He returned Lex's greeting with a cool, half hostile tip of the head. What puzzled Lex was the fact that Clement's regular run was along the Yuba and he was now out of his own territory.

A short, stocky, florid individual, Clement had to this point showed no particular animosity. Now, with scarcely

more than the lightness of polite curiosity, he asked, "What brings you, Quigley?"

"Only a routine look-see." Lex was glad the man had asked such a question, for it made it possible to reply in kind. "and you?"

"I'm coming onto the American." Clement looked at him steadily, as if eager to determine the effect the blunt announcement of intentions was to have.

Lex grinned. "Since I'm an invader, myself, I've got nothing to say against that, Jud. Besides, I've never been one to warn others out. I've built on dependability and dispatch, and I'll run that way. If you can beat me, the territory's yours."

For the first time Clement's features warmed. "I sort of figured you'd see it that way. You're a fair man, no matter what they're saying. We won't have any trouble."

"If there is any, the QE won't be the ones who started it." A visual image of Frank Fulton's dead body came into his mind, but Lex resisted the impulse to speak of it. He fell into casual conversation with Clement, and as soon as he had finished his supper he rose and left the dining room. He turned down a narrow hallway and rapped knuckles against the door at the end.

"Come in!" the hoarse voice of Mamma Dople called.

Lex opened the door and stepped into the big, skin hung, flower filled room. Mamma Dople gestured toward a rocker. "Sit down, Lex." She was a short woman and immensely fat, and her voice had an almost masculine heaviness and pitch. Who she had been, where she had come from, or why she had chosen to set herself up in business in this remote spot she had told no one, and aware of her sharp tongue and fist-making hands, nobody to Lex's knowledge had ever dared to ask. Now she said, "Tony Havasa just got in with Frank Fulton's body. He's going to take it down the river in the morning in a row boat. Men are fools, Lex Quigley."

"Why?"

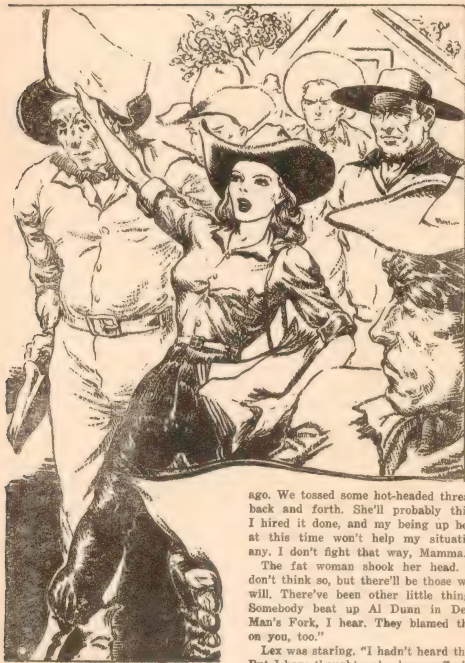


"To let themselves get caught in the trap this gold is baiting. Sometimes I think nature likes to torment her human creatures. I can find no other good reason for her putting all this color in the Sierra foothills. Yet you men—you think she put it there for your special benefit and you squabble and scramble to get your share!" Mamma Dopley scowled.

"The same thing goes on everywhere," Lex answered, amused by her habitual tartness of mind and tongue. "Except in most places the process is a lot slower. How long since you saw Connie, Fulton, Mamma?" Lex grinned at her.

"She'll be in before you leave in the morning. There's a girl I admire. Takes a man's place in her father's business

and makes the same sort of runs he and his men runners do in spite of—as you say out here—hell and high water. In that she's both smart and courageous. It's no easy thing being a woman, Lex Quigley."



Connie appeared and began tossing out newspapers.

Lex frowned. "She's going to hold me responsible for Frank's death. Frank and I quarreled in Sacramento a month

ago. We tossed some hot-headed threats back and forth. She'll probably think I hired it done, and my being up here at this time won't help my situation any. I don't fight that way, Mamma."

The fat woman shook her head. "I don't think so, but there'll be those who will. There've been other little things. Somebody beat up Al Dunn in Dead Man's Fork, I hear. They blamed that on you, too."

Lex was staring. "I hadn't heard that. But I have thought we've been suffering dirty work from Fulton. Somebody tried to fire my office in Placerville. Another time one of my men was shot at from above the trail."

Mamma frowned. "If Connie was aware that the Fulton Express was es-

gaging in that sort of thing—if they really were—she'll think it natural for you to reply in kind. You're right, Quigley, and I'm sorry. I—well, I rather entertained ideas about you two. Young, handsome—you'd make a pair."

Lex rose to his feet, grinning dryly. "Maybe I did, too. But things change fast in this country, and now that's neither here nor there. See you at breakfast time, Mamma." He went to his room, undressed thoughtfully and went to bed.

HE was up early the next morning and, as he had hoped, he managed to catch Connie Fulton in the big public room in the center of the tavern. She had come up the river in a whale boat, rowed by a dozen miners which had reached Mamma Dople's landing at dawn. She wore boy's clothing, bibless overalls tucked into stout cowhide boots, a gray flannel shirt, with a bandana knotted at her neck. The slim, lithe grace of her and the shock of deep chestnut hair that now tumbled to her shoulders as she warmed herself before the giant fireplace, lighted against the early morning mountain chill, went through Lex as he looked at her. She saw him enter the room and abruptly turned her face away.

Lex crossed to her. "I see you've already learned about it, Connie. I'm sorry. I expect you hold me responsible."

She looked at him, then, the quiet grief in her eyes melting before an upsurge of fury. "Did you think there'd be any question about it?"

He shook his head. "No. I knew how it would be. But you're wrong, Connie—oh, so wrong." He turned and started away.

"Quigley!" The sharp word arrested him, and as he turned back, her mouth opened hesitantly. "If you did do it, Quigley, you accomplished nothing. The Fulton Express is going on! Instead of ridding yourself of competition, you've only got more! I'm taking Dad's place, and my ideas are younger than his and more daring! I'm driving you out of

the north, Quigley! I'm driving you out in ruin!"

He bowed. "Again, all I can say is that you're wrong. But I must warn you that I'll brook no underhanded tactics! Things have been happening lately that I haven't liked, Connie! If the Fulton Express was behind them, it means you've got more of the same up your sleeve! I don't want to play rough, but if you persist in it, I will! Bear that in mind!"

Much of the passage up and down the American was by means of yawls and whaleboats rowed by the passengers themselves. After a quick breakfast, Lex Quigley found a party forming for the down passage on Mamma's landing, and he joined them. That evening he was back in his home office in Sacramento.

He found that several disturbing things had developed during his absence. Jake Carney, his office man in this town, had waited late for him.

"The steamers're ganging up on us, Lex! They're not satisfied with the eight hundred a month we've been paying them for a stateroom for our messengers to use. Sam Keck was in, claiming he'd talked to the rest of 'em. Starting the first of the month, he says, the cost'll be fifteen hundred!"

Lex swore, the fatigue and irritation that had been growing in him reaching the explosive point. "The dirty hold-ups! But I reckon they've got us. If we can't use the steamers between here and 'Frisco, we're ruined and they know it. I guess we'll pay." Then he scowled.

"And that ain't all. Somebody burned out our office in Marysville. Pete Rankin come down, and you can see him in the morning. Over two hundred letters destroyed. The dust in the safe wasn't hurt, though."

Alarm leaped along Lex's nerves. He was beginning to understand that much of his distaste for his present prospects stemmed from the fact that Connie Fulton was on the opposite side of the line. All day the clean, exciting image of her had haunted him. At the start, he had been pleased by the prospect of



an express war, beyond moving to extend his operations into this territory. He had not proposed to prosper by forcing others down, but through the development of new found possibilities. He

For a long moment she looked at him. "I hate you worse than anything else!" She whirled toward the door.

knowing her better. Now he wondered if by some quick, curious chemism of character he had recognized her as his woman from the very start, with subsequent events rupturing the first tendrils by which he had bound the concept of her to that of himself. From the deep, surgical shock within him, he suspected that this had been the case.

Yet events were crowding him on into a course of action he found it impossible either to like or to avoid. His deep, proud nature demanded that he accomplish all that he had set out to gain. He had taken no part in starting

was willing to admit a natural human resentment and concern on the part of those already in occupation, but he could see no justification for their hard and determined retaliation. It was they who had hurled the challenge, and he

could not help accepting it.

As he pondered Jake Carney's report, Lex could not escape a feeling of deep unease. The Marysville fire was a setback for which he could see no correction. The destroyed letters could never be replaced. A couple of hundred miners along the Yuba and Feather would have a right to feel highly indignant, and no excuse of underhanded work would satisfy them. A serious blow had been struck against the QE's reliability as letter carriers.

And there was an even more serious aspect. Each local QE office acted as a dusk bank, weighing and receipting for the miners' pokes, either to store or forward them to base offices. Though the safe at Marysville had survived the fire, doubt as to the same thing happening next time would doubtless be prevalent. Corrective action had to be taken immediately. The baffling thing was that he could see no clear-cut way of going about it.

CHAPTER III

IN THE MORNING Lex saw Pete Rankin, a leathery, dried-up little man who had trapped beaver in the Rockies. Rankin was blunt in his accusations: "The Fulton outfit, sure as you're a foot high, Lex! That jigger of their's, that Tolley Neuman, was in town that night. Somebody piled brush in the back of our shanty and torched it. I admit I was away catching me a drink. I figure it was Neuman, because me'n him had words a couple of days before."

"Maybe," Lex admitted. "Somebody tried the same thing in Placerville, but Duncan stopped it in time. But before we accept it that way, we've got to be sure. Anybody else in town at the time who doesn't like us?"

Rankin shook his head. "One of Jud Clement's men was there, but me'n him never had no trouble. Clement seems more willing to get along than almost anybody else mixing in this crazy express game! I got hold of new quarters and set us right back up in business,

Lex, but I figured I'd ought to come down and tell you about it!"

"Naturally. You're going to have a lot of soreheads on your hands, Pete. Every miner in the diggings'll figure he had a letter lost in that fire, whether he did or not. Do your best to stay on top of it."

Rankin had scarcely left the office when Lex thumped a fist on his desk, rose up and reached for his hat. The *Lila* had come in from San Francisco in the dawn, and Lex was suddenly resolved to catch it for the down passage. He turned thoughtfully toward his office man:

"Jake, one way to get out of a mess is to lift yourself out of it bodily. I'm going down for a talk with the Adams people."

Jake Carney was a bald, wispy man whose eyes were obscured by thick lenses. He looked thoughtful. "You mean about a tie-up?"

"I mean exactly that!"

Lex hurried through the busy, littered streets to the levee where the *Lila* was tied. He went aboard, going directly to the stateroom he had leased, as he had also leased them on other steamers to insure regular passage for his runners on the all-important arterial link between the seaport and the intermediate bases. Passage was in high demand.

Bill Coffee was already there, a plump but nail-hard man who was one of several working this reach. As Lex pushed into the cabin, Coffee looked up from the newspaper he was reading, in surprise. "Hello! Did I forget something?"

"I'm going down with you. Had a sudden change of mind."

Already, as he could see through the cabin window, the day's feverish activity had begun. There was little shelter for the glut of provisions and equipment discharged by the antlike procession of river boats. The river bank was everywhere piled and littered with flour, sugar, salt, bacon, canned goods, whisky, tools, furniture, bedding, hardware and myriad other articles of high demand. This great aggregation was dotted with

strings of pack mules, braying and kicking while profane drivers attempted to secure the stuff to their strong backs for relay on to the camps, anywhere from twenty to a hundred twenty-five miles distant.

Nervous and impatient, the *Lila* stood out into the stream, her stout walking beams thrusting, her big stern paddle kicking the packet into quick motion. The day promised to be warm again, and as the carrier lined out on its journey, Lex found his own thoughts likewise taking swift direction, and a mounting excitement grew in him. He was proposing a daring thing as an offset to the damage being done to his company but, as he dwelt on it, it seemed sound and promising.

For some months he had entertained the hope of securing a hook-up with the big Adams express company which, with its eastern connections and considerable financial backing, dominated the over-all California express scene. In return for gold dust Adams could issue drafts on its eastern offices, which miners could mail to family or financial agents, thus conveniently transferring their new-found treasure to the old haunts, to which nearly to a man they planned shortly to return.

If he could persuade the Adams company to appoint the Quigley Express its field agents on the circuits and in remote camps not immediately served by itself, the prestige, backing and eastern forwarding facilities would do much for the QE. The night before it had struck Lex that now if ever was the time for such a bold effort. With Adams backing, the damage he had already suffered would seem negligible. And Lex believed he had enough to offer in return to attract the big company.

THE *Lila* slid swiftly down the Sacramento and into the northern horn of San Francisco bay, the unclouded sun glinting on the broad waters, the rhythmic pulsions of the steamer lulling its passengers to drowsy content. It threaded its way through heavy



Lex looked at the gold slugs by the lamp-light.

traffic; other packets, a few sailing boats, whalers rowed by eager men, and tied up in San Francisco in late afternoon.

Lex Quigley hurried ashore, eager to reach the Adams office before it closed for the day. The lusty young city was as cluttered and sprawling and ugly as was Sacramento or any other town in the diggings, but it wore a certain dignity stemming from its unquestioned dominance of the area. Lex made his way through deeply dusted streets and found the structure he sought.

To his relief he was early enough, and he was able immediately to see Steve Donough, an Adams official. Lex had been on friendly personal relations with the man, and now he briefly outlined his proposal.

"It looks to me like it'd be as profitable to you people as to me, Steve. I can offer you a whole new field hook-up, for I haven't been foolish enough to move into locations you already have covered. I'd want to keep on running my own business, and all I ask is a tie-up with your facilities and the privilege of advertising myself as your agent."

Donough nodded. He was an elderly man, but his eyes were young and lively and his body movements brisk. He grinned slowly. "It'd be a fine idea, Lex. The only trouble is, you come in second on making the proposition."

Lex stared. "Who else is interested?" "I'll tell you only because we've been good friends. Frank Fulton."

"Fulton's dead!" Not until then did Lex realize that information as to that had not yet had time to reach San Francisco. "Robbed and murdered on the trails, up on the American, and you're likely to hear that I was behind it!"

"I won't be too inclined to believe it, Lex unless somebody presents pretty good evidence that you did. But I don't imagine Frank's death'll have much effect on his outfit. That girl was always the driving force. It was her idea to hook up with us."

"You made the deal yet?" Lex asked.

Donough shook his head. "No, because the Fulton Express serves only the northern fields. We could have different agents in north and south, but I'd like better to have it one. They say they're going into the south, too. Frankly, you've got a war on your hands, Lex. But I haven't committed myself to them definitely, and I'll tell you what. Let's do nothing about it for another few weeks. I have a hunch one of you is going under in that time. Adams will sign up with the survivor. Maybe that's a hard way of looking at it, but this is country where a man has got to remain impersonal."

LEX left, profoundly depressed at first by the new perspective. He cursed himself roundly for not having acted upon his plan when he first conceived it, but he had believed he could secure a better deal with Adams by first invading the north and firmly establishing himself there. Now he was forced to a reluctant admiration for Connie Fulton's business acumen and celerity. The fight he had on his hands, he realized dismally, was going to be tougher than he had anticipated.

He understood now what Connie had meant, there yesterday morning at Mamma Dopley's tavern, when she had said, "I'm taking Dad's place, and my ideas are younger than his and more daring! I'm driving you out of the north,

Quigley! I'm driving you out in ruin!" She had believed she held a trump card.

So the conclusion was inescapable now that she was resorting to dirty tactics in playing it, relieving her conscience perhaps with the stubborn belief that the Quigley Express was likewise indulging in underhanded war. Anger mounted in Lex as he checked steamer departures and found he could start back to Sacramento that evening on the *Andrea*, which would also carry Lee Salvars, another of his San Francisco-Sacramento runners.

Lex was aboard the *Andrea* when it sailed, his mood in black and bitter contrast to what it had been on the down passage. In the cabin with him, Salvars had an express box crowded with letter mail and several bundles of newspapers. Some of these were from other California papers, going as press exchanges to Sacramento and the few other northern towns supporting newspapers. After he had shown his burden to Lex, Salvars looked at him closely.

"You look like you'd swallowed a lemon, boss."

"Not a lemon. A yellow jacket."

CHAPTER IV

LEX QUIGLEY spent the next several days in Sacramento, carefully plotting a course of action. And during those few days several things happened to lend impetus to the effort.

The Quigley Express was quartered in a jerry-built structure, framed partly with lumber for which Lex had paid an exorbitant price, completed with logs, flimsy box boards and crude slabs. It had a rough puncheon floor, and the interior was divided into the large outer room where business was transacted, and a smaller room that was Lex's private office.

This office served as a relay point for express consigned to interior points, provided a local, private post office, and a big iron safe for the deposit of gold dust being brought out by runners. The dust bank performed two services. For a charge of one half per cent a month plus

the privilege of lending or otherwise using the dust, it accepted pokes on general deposit. For a fee of one per cent a month it accepted special deposits, which meant that the miner put his name on his poke and it was stored securely as it was. With the hoped for, and now to be fought for, Adams hook-up, Lex would be in a position to buy dust outright and to issue drafts that would be honored by Adams' eastern offices. He would receive even greater express burdens for the interior, and greater quantities of dust from there. It was a prize worth every effort, and he meant to have it.

Lex's first positive move was to visit the editor of the Sacramento Bulletin. As he moved down the haphazard streets, he noted with an habitual amused interest the fever and clutter and clatter that was the daily tenor. There were a few hotels with broad verandas clustered with gray-shirted, slouch-hatted mining men. There were makeshift clothing establishments gorged with red flannel shirts, heavy pantaloons, gum waders, all strung on lines and blowing in the stirs of air. There were large mercantile establishments housed even in tents, offering dried foods and cured meats, sugar, molasses, coffee, cheeses, patent drugs, picks, axes, shovels, hammers, mattresses and blankets. Drygoods boxes were obtainable for two or three dollars each and found ready buyers. Whiskey could be had for sixteen dollars the bottle, nails for five dollars the pound, tacks for five dollars the package, a small dried mackerel for fifty cents. Yet price was rarely a consideration. Men had money out of proportion to their crying needs as measured against the scant supply.

Here as everywhere in America a melting pot of populations was bubbling. There were pug-uglies from the slums of New York and other eastern cities, farmers from the Mississippi valley, cow punchers from the Texas Panhandle, trappers from the Rockies, settlers from the northward Oregon Country. There were ex-convicts, "Sydney birds", from



Lex was pounding across the flat Sacramento valley.

Australia and Tasmania, Mexicans, Peruvians and Chilenos drawn from the riff-raff of southern seaports. There were saloons and gambling houses and brothels. Here was being fused a new people, the Argonauts, whose courage and effort, whose ingenuity and salty humor, was digging the footings for a great new area and a great new era.

LEX QUIGLEY passed through this scene, feeling its color and import in his blood, but determined upon private business. He found Tom Burns, editor of the paper, seated at an ink-smudged desk. He stated his business without preliminaries.

"Tom, I've made it a point to get you the eastern papers and your press exchanges without delay. In return, you've been good enough to mention me favorably now and then in your columns. Now I have a favor to ask."

The editor nodded, a stocky, swarthy individual addicted to biting his finger nails. "Without you express people, I'd hate to try to get out a paper in this country. Name it, Lex. Anything short of libeling Connie Fulton."

"You know about that, too, huh?"

"Who doesn't? And, candidly, Lex, you're under a handicap with so charming a competitor. If you care to know, the betting's pretty heavy on Connie."

Lex made a wry face, but managed a grin. "Maybe they're smart. She's a clever woman."

"To say nothing of daring."

"I'm aware of the young lady's qualifications, Tom. Let's get to the favor."

There have been ugly whisperings about me, lately. In your next issue, you'll be carrying the story of Frank Fulton's death. I assume you'll be objective and merely report the fact that he was robbed and killed on the trail. But you know as well as I do what the private talk is going to be. So I'd like for you to run another story in the same issue. On July 22nd an attempt was made to burn down my Hangtown office. Three days ago a similar effort in Marysville succeeded. One before and one after Frank's murder, I want you to run a story on that, in the same issue, to offset the account of his death."

The editor looked thoughtful. "Glad you told me about that. And I'll do it. A lot of people are going to blame you no matter what, Lex. But it'd help the more reasonable ones to know there were two sides to the question."

"That's the way I figured it. A man's reputation is everything in this express business."

Burns smiled. "The rainbow express! A pot of gold on either end! But listen, Lex, do you know what I think? Maybe I've got a less emotional viewpoint on it than you. If I were to read what you want this country to read in my next issue, do you know how it'd seem to me? Knowing that both the Fulton and the Quigley outfits had been subjected to dirty work, I'd be just curious enough to wonder if there wasn't some third angle to it!"

"You mean with somebody outside the Fulton and Quigley outfits stirring up trouble between the two?"

"Exactly. For their own profit."

The forelegs of Lex's chair hit the floor with a bang. "By gum, you've put your inky finger on something I've failed to see, Tom!" And he was gone.

As Lex stepped through the door of the QE office, he paused momentarily. A miner in dusty cowhide boots, blue bibbed overalls, flannel shirt and floppy hat was standing before the counter, a look of anger and determination on his face, listening to the clerk.

"I know you've got a right to draw

out your dust if you want to, Kingman. The only thing is, you just put it in last week. It ain't safe for you to try to keep it yourself." Jake Carney raised his eyebrows and spread his hands in a reasoning gesture.

The miner thumped the counter with a gnarled fist. "I want my dust, Carney—not your jawbone! I don't trust this here Quigley outfit no more, and I want my dust right now!"

Carney shot Lex an exasperated look, shrugged and stooped to open the safe. Lex said nothing, but his jaw bit tight as he moved on into his own office. As soon as the miner had left, Carney came to stand in the doorway.

"He ain't the first one, Lex. Been a dozen or so like that the last couple of days."

Lex nodded. He had anticipated this sort of thing since the start of the trouble, but the concrete evidence of it had shaken him. He dropped into a seat, his mind brooding on the situation. The new perspective Tom Burns had given him had excited him, but the feeling quickly dulled. As he searched the circumstances, he could think of no one who could profit from fomenting trouble between the two leading independent express companies. For a moment he had been carried away with the thought that there might be no real trouble between himself and Connie Fulton. Yet sober reflection would not support the hope. And the miners had started withdrawing their dust. Already Carney had told him they were cancelling subscriptions to the Quigley mail delivery. In spite of his efforts to this point, disintegration was setting in, rather than the sweeping progress his spirit so constantly required.

LATE that evening Adam Upjohn came in from the American River run. He brought no dust from Derby Duncan's safe at Placerville, and he hurried into Lex's office with a letter from Derby. Lex read it, frowning:

"You better shag yourself up here, Lex. Freddie Brawley never got in from the run across from the north fork, and

he should have got here yesterday. This town's gone ugly against Quigley Express, which is why you didn't receive any dust this trip. You better come."

Lex looked at Upjohn. "Things look kind of bad in Placerville, huh?"

The runner nodded. "Yeah. I went into a saloon last night and nearly got beat up. And Derby said to tell you he forgot to put in his letter that nearly every man jack up there's cancelled his mail subscription."

Lex caught a little sailing vessel the next morning, and by midafternoon was at Mamma Dople's landing. He went to the tavern to change to rougher clothes and eat his supper before hiring a horse from Mamma's stable for the ride on to Placerville. As he stepped into the tavern, his mouth hinged open.

Connie Fulton was standing across the desk from Mamma, and both turned their heads toward him. Lex grinned, removing his hat, and Connie stiffened, looking quickly away. A smile of greeting, mixed with embarrassment, came to Mamma Dople's fat features.

"Light down and set, stranger!" Mamma called.

Connie turned, preparing to leave, then abruptly changed her mind. She moved aside and waited impersonally while Lex came up to the desk.

"No room, tonight, Mamma," Lex said. "But tell Charlie to get a horse saddled for me to ride to Placerville. I'll want it right after you've fed me."

Mamma nodded, and for some mysterious reason of her own turned and waddled off through the door that led to the back of the tavern. A momentary panic flooded Lex, but he turned toward Connie.

"I didn't expect to run into you, Connie."

She did not smile. "Nor I you. But it's just as well. We've been needing to talk, Quigley." She looked around to make certain no one was listening. "This gives me a chance to thank you for your latest efforts."

Lex lifted a quizzical eyebrow. "Just which efforts?"



Clement was busy eating.

"Which would I mean but your dirty ones? That's all I've ever had from you, Lex Quigley! In case you don't know just which I mean, I'm speaking of that man brawley of yours!"

"What do you know about Freddie Brawley?" Lex asked sharply. "That's what brought me up there. A letter from Derby Duncan tells me Brawley never reached Placerville from the crossing between the forks. What do you know about him?"

The girl lifted haughty brows. "That a miners' court is holding him in jail over in Logtown, at my suggestion! A runner of mine was drowned in that swimming slough below Three Points, a couple of days ago! My Mathenas man found his body but could find no trace of his pouch. There was better than six thousand dollars worth of dust in it, Lex Quigley! And your man came over the same route at about the same time. I expect the two met, somewhere near Three Points!"

Fury was rising in Lex Quigley. "Any more of your troubles you'd like to dump on my shoulders? Do your feet hurt? Do the fleas disturb your sleep at night? I've a few troubles of my own that maybe you'd like to talk about! A couple of my offices've been torched. Somebody's drumming up a hate campaign against me! I'm losing letter subscribers and dust depositors! Is there any knowledge in your pretty head about that?"

The girl's slim body tautened, and even in boy's clothing it had dignity and charm. "I know nothing whatsoever about that, Lex Quigley, beyond what everyone has heard!"

"I don't believe it! And let me tell you something! I'm conscious of your beauty and charm, which is drawing sympathy to you in this fight, but I'm not letting it blind me to the fact that you're also a scheming and unscrupled woman! You trumped those charges against Freddie Brawley, just to add to the indictment against the QE! I mean to bust your game wide open!"

For a long moment she looked at him, her feeling growing ever more intense. "I hate you worse than anything I have ever detested!" She whirled and headed toward the door.

"Which means that she loves you," a voice behind Lex said. He turned to discover Mamma Dopley behind her desk again, a look of sadness on her fat, ugly face. "Which means that she loves you so much she can only express her unhappiness through hate!"

CHAPTER V

THEN Mamma was looking at Lex. "You were rough on her. Too rough."

Lex smiled bitterly. "I think she's getting benefit enough from the fact that she's an attractive woman. Why do women exploit their sex, Mamma?"

"I wouldn't know."

He was instantly sorry for his remark, as he looked at her quickly. The woman was smiling, not without bitterness, and with a flash of insight Lex wondered if that were not the whole secret of Mamma Dopley. The massive folds of flesh, the face so ugly it possessed a certain charm! For the first time since he had known her, he caught a glimpse of what was underneath. He remembered her earlier remark, "It's no easy thing being a woman, Lex Quigley."

For Mamma Dopley it had not been easy, he could readily concede. But for Connie Fulton it was entirely a different matter. She had everything any woman

could yearn for; certainly she attracted a sufficiency of men.

As if reading his thoughts, Mamma Dopley said, "It's not easy for Connie, either. We two understand each other and she comes by here as often as she can. A woman is locked behind so many doors, Lex." She smiled grimly. "And now you two must bring each other down in ruin, if you can. I told you that Nature had baited a trap for her silly creatures here. And you're falling into it! But your supper's ready. Go eat it, and be on your way. I don't like you very well, today!"

THE RIDE to Placerville was peaceful and uninterrupted. Lex reached the camp in the gathering dusk and found the Quigley Express office locked, with Derby Duncan not in evidence on the premises. Lex started through the town, looking for him.

The fevered activities of the day had changed now to the equally feverish pursuits of evening. The long, narrow, straggling main street was crowded with miners. The lusty ones were spending their over supply of exuberance in the saloons and dens of vice, wanting to garner on the spot the fruits of their back-breaking toils.

To Lex Quigley it was a profound excitement that from the start had stirred deeply within himself. Now for the first time it struck him that it was perhaps too intense. With over-stimulation a man passed through the zones of normal gratification and enjoyment and came to an unexpected depth of unease and even sordidness within himself. Here on the mother lode men had reached that substratum of the human spirit. He wondered with abrupt insight if this was not what Mamma Dopley had meant, that men were being drawn beyond their rational depth, from which circumstance any manner of unlooked for and unwelcome events might flow.

He searched for Derby Duncan with mounting impatience, for he had decided to cross over immediately to the north fork and Logtown, where the miners' court was holding Freddie Brawley for

trial. Such judicial units were inclined to be hasty, and while Lex doubted that they could build any kind of a case against Brawley, they might let raw emotion blind them to certain logical contradictions and gaps. Lex wanted to talk to the responsible ones as soon as possible, and now Derby Duncan was holding him up.

It was on the off chance that the attempt to burn the express office might have frightened Duncan into moving over to the hotel that Lex checked the register at the Placerville Tavern. Duncan's name did not appear on it, but Lex's gaze rested with interest on that of Jud Clement.

Remembering the meeting at Mamma Dople's tavern a few days earlier, and Clement's announcement that he was coming into the American River territory, Lex turned on impulse toward the stairs. At Lex's rap on a door at the end of the hallway, Clement's paper thin voice called, "Come in!", and Lex stepped inside.

He paused in surprise just across the threshold. Jud Clement was seated in a straight back chair tilted against the wall, a half smoked cigar in his hand. He straightened, lifted the cigar half up only to let the hand fall away again as he exchanged a quick, surprised look with a man seated on the bed.

Derby Duncan was staring in frank startlement. "Well, hello, Lex! I figured you'd spend the night at Mamma Dople's and I wasn't looking for you so soon!" He climbed to his feet, straightening his clothes with a nervous gesture.

A MOMENTARY bewilderment arrested Lex. It wasn't too strange an occurrence for rival express men to fraternize in off hours, and the surprise of this pair could very well stem from no more than the fact that they had expected someone other than himself. Then he said, "Come down to the office with me, Derby. I've got more riding to do to-night." He swiveled his attention back to Jud Clement. "Still working yourself up a subscribers' list, Jud?"

Clement nodded, grinning a little. "Yeah. And before you learn it someplace else, I might as well tell you I've picked quite a few plums off your tree, mister!" Yet the remark was friendly enough. Clement struck a match and applied it to his cold cigar.

"You'll soon be picking them off the ground!" Lex said sourly. "Somebody's shaking the tree, Jud. I don't know just who, yet. But when I find out, he'd better be ready to defend himself."

The other lifted calm eyes. "I told you beforehand I was coming up here, Lex. Does it make sense I'd do that if I was inclined to do my work in the dark?"

"Nothing makes sense, right now. Come on, Derby."

Derby Duncan opened the express office, and they passed inside; then he locked the door again and lighted a kerosene lamp. He said, "I hope you ain't sore at me for hob-nobbing with Clement once in a while, Lex. I might as well tell you that I do, when he's in town. He's a pretty good sort. He may be our competitor pretty soon, but he fights fair. Knew him when we both was shoe-string runners up the San Joaquin."

"It's none of my business who your personal friends are!" Lex snapped. "I wanted to talk to you about your letter. I found out what happened to Freddie Brawley. They've got him locked up over in Logtown. Charged with killing and robbing a Fulton runner near Three Points. I'm going on over there tonight. As to the boycott against Quigley, here in Placerville, I don't know what you can do except to stay open for business and put down any false talk you hear circulating, and keep your eye peeled. Have you got any dust in the safe?"

"Sent you the last I took in by Pete Tolles, three days ago. Somebody's spreading ugly talk. I hate to tell you, but our letter subscriptions've about been cancelled out, too. Unless something happens to stop the talk and restore confidence, Lex, we're washed up here. Clement or Connie Fulton'll have it all."

"So you're sidling up to Clement? How do you know he isn't the one spreading

the scandal?"

For an instant anger flashed in Duncan's eyes, then he smiled grimly. "I'm too old to start running the trails again, and too soft to try digging a living from the ground. If Quigley goes bust, I'll go to work for Clement, or whoever'll have me. This is country where a man's got to look out for himself—loyalty or no!"

LEX left Mamma Doplet's horse at the livery to be returned to her by somebody going down that way, and secured a fresh mount for the crossing to the upper fork. He rode out of Placerville in waxing moonlight, depression growing on him again with the feeling that he had become more baffled than enlightened by his short stop in the camp, and a great loneliness stemming from the ever recurring evidence that here nothing counted but a man's own immediate gain.

He crossed the south fork at Carson's ferry, and settled himself grimly in the saddle for the long rough trails ahead of him. Even with the passing hours he could not relieve himself of the strange, disturbing feeling that the discovery of Derby Duncan with Jud Clement had given him. His mind kept going back to what Tom Burns, the Sacramento editor, had said about the possibility of there being a third angle to the situation, somebody moving surreptitiously to foment trouble between the Quigley and Fulton concerns, reaping profit in their concealed way from it.

It could be Clement, yet the fellow had always been open and above board about his intentions, which Lex counted as a good sign in any man. And now he wondered about Derby Duncan, and an annoying sense of impotence grew in him as he acknowledged that under the circumstances, in this strange element, a man could not know very much about the background of any of his associates. Here nothing counted but gain—gain—gain.

The milky gray of dawn was diluting the night over Logtown when Lex Quigley rode over the rise above it. He could

accomplish nothing for a few more hours, and fatigue was heavy upon him. Dismounting, he hobbled his horse so it could graze, then stretched himself under a tough-fibred Sierra pine. He awakened with bright sunlight in his eyes.

Logtown had begun stirring when Lex entered its outskirts, and there was little to distinguish it from a hundred other camps in the region. There was the same hodgepodge of buildings erected with no thought to town layout, the same deep dust and litter of old hats, boots, broken bottles, and empty tins. Quigley Express maintained no regular office here, but had appointed a merchant by the name of Hamley as its agent. The store was now open, and Lex strode inside.

Lurt Hamley was a heavy, jovial individual, and he seemed anxious to see Lex. "I figured you'd be up, Lex, and I managed to get them to hold off trying Brawley. They ain't got any case against him, but sometimes a miners' court don't need a case. A killing don't mean much in this country unless stealing's involved. That's one thing gets a miner goaty—let somebody swipe his poke or his pick or his grub!"

"If you can steer me onto the right men, I'll talk to this miners' court."

"Tain't the court I'm worried about!" Hamley returned. "These boys've got a trick when they can't do a case up legal. I'm scared they'll organize a vigilante committee and take Brawley and hang him and have done with it!"

LEX found the situation to be much as Hamley had described it. He spent a couple of hours of the forenoon talking to the elected president of the court and to the hired town marshal. The most he could extract from them was a promise to hold off legal action, and to try to stem illegal events, until Lex could have a chance to prepare Brawley's defense.

At noon Lex rode out of Logtown, and again he left the river route and headed across country, the impulse strong within him to call old Pete Rankin, his Marysville agent, into the case. Rankin being

an old time trapper, this looked like a case suited to his peculiar talents.

Freddie Brawley had been held for trial at the instigation of Connie Fulton, who had based her suspicions on nothing more substantial than the record, as she saw it, of strife between the two companies and the circumstantial fact that Brawley had passed the site of the robbery and murder around the time it must have happened. Lex had talked to Brawley, a good looking, honest-countenanced youngster, and the very worried chap could throw no light on the situation.

"I didn't see a thing on the trail that could be called suspicious, Mr. Quigley. I didn't see hide nor hair of a Fulton runner."

Lex had an idea now that Pete Rankin might be able to dig up something by studying the country at the murder site, particularly the Fulton runner's tracks and any inconspicuous but untoward sign in the locality. It was the only thing he could think of that might bring Brawley free.

It was evening again when he got into Marysville. This camp, at the junction of the Feather and Yuba rivers, was his sub-base for the upper northern region, and he found Pete Rankin at the new Quigley office, which had replaced the one just destroyed by fire. As he entered the town, Lex had been immediately aware of a strange excitement in the atmosphere. Men were huddled about, not in the easy comradeship of a normal evening, but in tight, intense little knots, and as he rode up the street, somebody called a raucous, "Boo!"

Now he found the door of the express office locked, with Pete Rankin seated inside, a sawed-off shotgun across his lap. When he recognized Lex, the old man put the gun on the counter, led him in and sighed.

"I don't know what brings you, Lex, but I'm glad you showed up!"

"What's been going on, Pete?"

The old man lighted a lamp, then turned, his leathery old face stern.

"A run on the bank is all. I'm cleaned out. And worse."

CHAPTER VI

THE AIR about Lex Quigley seemed to rock. He dropped into a chair, noting for the first time that the door to the iron safe stood wide open. A number of dust pokes were still visible inside.

Noting his glance, the old man said, "The special deposits, and the only reason I've still got 'em is their owners're up the line. There's been some dirty work going on, Lex, and maybe you'll want to hang me. Maybe I orter let you. I been taking inventory of the deposits every night, just like you want, and I kept the books in balance. The trouble is with them special deposits. They came in here weighed and sealed and tagged, and I never bothered 'em except to inventory 'em. Lex, there ain't a thimbleful of dust in a good quarter of them danged bags. They're filled with brass filings! And the ones that are all come down from Logtown!"

"No! But how?"

"Danged if I know how! Yesterday they started drawing heavy on the general deposits, and I took up every receipt they brung in, paying out good dust. I figured it was only the general stuff they was uneasy about. Then this morning, the boys with pokes on special started coming in. And I let them have 'em. One of them busted the seal to make sure what was inside and found brass filings. Well, I had my hands full, after that! So I locked up. Then they started a riot, and I got my shotgun and told 'em if they'd just hold their horses the company's make good every danged receipt outstanding hereabouts!"

Lex shuddered. His reliability in the case was only one of his immediate concerns. According to Rankin's account, the miners were not to be blamed for starting a run if one of them had found the poke he had left on special deposit filled with brass filings. The question was, who had made the exchange and gotten away with it so easily?

Studying the worried old man's open countenance, Lex could not believe that

Pete Rankin had had a part in it. These pokes had come down from logtown and there were others who would have had the same chance. Each Quigley office on the many circuits accepted gold dust, then forwarded it to sub-base and base offices for safe-keeping. The specially deposited pokes were weighed and sealed in the presence of the owner and were not disturbed again until the owner reclaimed them.

The implications were staggering. How long had it been going on, and how much of the same worthless stuff did he have in the big safe in Sacramento? Slowly it dawned on him that he might not even be solvent, lacking the means, even with his personal resources, to take up Quigley Express' liabilities. Anyway, nothing could save him from a general run for once word of this development had spread, the Sacramento office would be stormed.

"Think this has reached Sacramento yet?" he asked Rankin worriedly.

"Likely not. The Yuba leaves in about a hour, and it'll be the first boat today. But word'll go down on it, and there'll be 'hell a-poppin' in your town, mister!"

"I'll be on the Yuba!"

With Rankin, Lex examined the pokes yet in the safe, which belonged to miners outside of the immediate Marysville area and so had not yet been called for. It was exactly as the old man had said. The gold had been emptied from half a dozen of them, the pokes being refilled with brass filings. And the pokes that had been tampered with had all come from Logtown.

Lex climbed to his feet. "Pete, I came over here to get your help in getting a boy freed from a miners' court in Logtown on a trumped-up murder and robbery charge. Maybe the answer to that case is right here. When word of this spreads up to the men who own these pokes, nothing can keep him from hanging. I'm going down to Sacramento and figure my next move out from there."

He departed immediately, filled with peculiar determination.

THE Yuba stood in to the Sacramento levee a little after midnight. It had been a taut, nerve-racking trip. As Lex came aboard the crowded little packet he was instantly aware that the excitement was going with him. Nobody had tried to molest him, but as he had arranged for passage so late he was obliged to sit out the trip in the main passenger cabin, ignoring the hostile looks of the other passengers, yet keenly aware of them.

The steamer had barely touched the landing when Lex leaped ashore and headed on the double for the Quigley office. The place was dark, but he let himself in with his own key. The normal look to the interior, as he lighted a lamp, surprised him until he remembered that the alarm was just now reaching Sacramento. Tomorrow morning it would be a far different situation.

Lex opened the big safe, his glance flicking over the stored treasure inside, the innumerable dust pokes and gold slugs. At random he took two pokes from the special deposits and carried them to the counter by the lamp. Breaking the seals, he opened them with trembling fingers. He made a sound that was scarcely more than a deep sigh. The iniquity had included the Sacramento office. Both pokes had come through Placerville and were spuriously filled.

He knew without examining the other special deposits that the thievery had been thorough-going. He closed the door of the safe, absently twirled the dial to lock it, and went on into his own indirectly illumined office, where he dropped into a chair.

His mind ran hastily over the other two dust-banks in the San Joaquin region, weighing each of his trusted agents. It was impossible, in light of these developments, to decide which could be relied upon and which could not. In this vast gold exploitation industry, which had sprung to life in no more than a pair of years, a man was obliged to hire anyone whose objective qualifications sufficiently met his needs. There was no time to plumb the mysteries of character by which this one was lent moral integrity

and that one a lack of it. Dishonesty did not always show on the surface, for under these prevailing influences a man became different to what he had been before he arrived. Once a poke was received on special deposit, examined and sealed, it was never opened for fear that such tampering would arouse distrust among the miners, though careful inventorying and bookkeeping were things Lex had insisted on.

Mamma Dopley had evidenced a pretty deep understanding of the human heart. Her empty womanhood, locked in its folds of fat, had done a better job of plumbing his fellow men than had Lex Quigley.

Yet the reason for it all faded into unimportance against the terrible practical urgency that was upon him. Even though the thievery had not extended into the south, he doubted that the entire Quigley Express had sufficient resources to make good this staggering loss in the north.

DEBATING the question as to whether he should open the doors of the Sacramento office on the morrow and let them have their run, or remain closed until he could take an inventory of the assets of the entire company, Lex could reach no decision. Either way the end result would be utter ruin.

Yet, as calmness returned to him, definite patterns of logic began to assume shape. There had to be a ring of men behind the dust thievery, and they would have to be in the out offices, where the dust was received, weighed and sealed. His mind went unerringly to Derby Duncan in Placerville, and through whose hands everything coming from the South Fork passed. And all the spurious pokes in Marysville had come from Logtown, which pointed the immediate finger of suspicion at fat, jovial Lurt Hamley.

Were these two, if guilty, the only ones, or was the operation more far flung than he had discovered, under some one head? His mind went to Jud Clement, remembering the hobnobbing between him and Derby Duncan in Placerville,

but that possibility seemed almost too obvious to be probable. Clement was tough and aggressive in his own way, but to this point he had called his shots before making them. It was more likely that somebody else had organized the enterprise, perhaps Derby Duncan himself, or the fat Hamley or some one with even more cunning and daring and influence over his fellows.

Lex Quigley sat up straight in his chair. Into his mind swam the hostile, taunting image of Connie Fulton. She could have planned it and corrupted his help, for she was a woman who could bend almost any man to her will. In his ears rang her furious challenge:

"Ruin . . . ruin . . . I'll drive you out in utter ruin . . . !"

CHAPTER VII

LEX spent the rest of that night in the office, and with daybreak the dreaded crowd began to form outside the door. It was restrained enough at first, but it doubled in size with each passing hour. Opening time came, and still Jake Carney had not shown up, and Lex set this down to a lack of courage. Carney was only a hireling of the Quigley Express and probably did not care to take a hand in the crisis.

If the temper of the crowd permitted, Lex meant to talk to them presently and explain that he was remaining closed until the situation could be got in hand, after which the company would either pay off completely or at least fairly at so much on the dollar.

Yet as the regular opening hour came and passed, the ugly mood of the crowd began to show itself. They realized that he was inside, and calls and jeers were mingled with more reasonable pleas that Lex open up to them. As he waited, still undecided as to what his best procedure would be, the profanity and coarse, jeering insults began to rankle him.

He tried to restore his calm by telling himself that the miners were not to be blamed. They had placed their treasure in his keeping in out-and-out trust, and

he had given them nothing but receipts in return. They had been given tangible reason to believe that the result of all their efforts, their privations and their separations from distant loved ones had been wrested from them in treachery. As, indeed, it had. They could not know, and would never believe, that the treachery had not been Lex Quigley's.

Yet the fury of frustration within himself would not be downed. More and more he was realizing the difficulty of ever persuading anyone that he himself had not been directly responsible for the dust thefts and substitutions. He had shown an inordinate ambition and aggressiveness. Connie Fulton, Derby Duncan, whoever had engineered the crime, must be banking on that. They would have the treasure, his ruin, and they would defy him to prove his charges should he make them.

That was not the way. He had to prove his charges before he made them, and to do so he had to remain silent for a time. At last he opened the office door, stepped outside, turning deliberately to fasten the door again.

"Just a minute there, Quigley!" an ugly voice called. "We want our dust!"

Lex turned and faced them. "I know how you feel, men! I don't blame you. This is as big a surprise to me as it has been to you. All I can say now is that you'll get your dust or its equivalent. That I promise. I'm staying closed for a day or so, but when I open again, you can have what's coming to you, if you still want it." He pushed his way through the crowd.

The movement was bold enough to command respect. There were protests, and on the fringes of the crowd curses and insults were mouthed. Yet Lex Quigley shoved on through and moved down the sidewalk.

A few blocks away, he cut across the street, heading for the Fulton Express agency. As he stepped through the door, he grinned coldly. As he had hoped, and half expected, Connie Fulton was there, having come in that morning from her trip up the American.

"Quite a show," Lex said. "I hope you're enjoying it, Connie!"

She whirled toward him, and this time there was less animosity to her than concern. "Oh, what is it? What're we up against?"

Puzzlement creased his forehead. "We? I don't understand you, Connie."

Dick Allbright, her Sacramento agent, discreetly moved toward the door. "Reckon I'll run out and get me a bite of breakfast, Miss Fulton." At her nod, he left.

"**S**IT DOWN, Lex," Connie said. "I guess I've got some crawfishing to do. Mamma Dopley has been working on me. I guess she rather succeeded. I just never could quite persuade myself that I believed all I tried to tell myself about you! Lex, we've been fools, blaming and rowing with each other while somebody has been pulling off a ghastly thing! I've known about the whisperings against you, and I was glad. But now I'm not. This run, and what happened in Marysville! Lex, I had nothing to do with that!"

She seemed sincere, intensely so, and she was either genuinely upset or far more clever than he had so far conceded. Yet looking at her, seeing her now without that infuriating look of contempt, Lex knew the reason for his own deep and long harbored sense of unease. It had never quite rung true with him, either, that she could have done the things he had suspected. He believed her, and a gladness broke in him at the discovery.

He said, "I know, Connie. But it wasn't until late last night that I discovered how thorough going and ghastly it was! You've heard that the Quigley Marysville office has been returning brass filings in place of the dust it took in? Well, the same thing has happened here. It's big, and I'm going to find that dust! Whoever is responsible for the theft and the murder of your father and the runner at Three Points wouldn't dare try to sell or forward that much dust for fear of rousing dangerous suspicions.

I have the feeling that it's still in this country. I'm going to get it. Then if the miners still don't trust me, they can have it back."

"I'll help you any way I can! I lost my father in this! That's worth as much to me as your reputation is to you. Lex, our man, I think, is Jud Clement!"

"I've thought of him, but it doesn't add up. What makes you think so?"

"Because I've been in the American River country more than you, lately. Clement's only making a cover by his efforts to line up a circuit in that country. I've seen him and Derby Duncan hobnobbing an awful lot. And over in Logtown, I've seen him hanging around with Lurt Hamley!"

Lex struck his palm with an angry fist. "Lurt Hamley, too! Then that's the missing link! That puts it all together, Connie! They've been weighing and sealing the special deposits in the regulation manner in the miner's presence, then making their substitutions afterward! Then Duncan's been sending his pilfered pokes down here to Sacramento, while Hamley's been sending his to Marysville. That's why all the pokes Pete Rankin and I examined over there last night were full of brass. They knew it would be discovered eventually and a run'd be started!"

The girl looked at him with interest. "And when you were forced out they could step in!"

"You're right. And it's logical that they'd keep the dust until that time, when they could work it off as legitimate business!" He turned to her again, a little awkwardly. "Connie, I can't tell you how differently it makes the world look to have the things between us put down. It gives me purpose, and I'm going to beat that gang! Then I want to have another kind of a little talk with you. Along the lines suggested by Mamma Dopleet."

She smiled gravely, offering her hand. "In its proper place, Lex, I can think of nothing I'd rather talk about. Mamma told me she has been working on you, too!"

"There's one thing I can mention now! If I can save Quigley express, there's no reason for us to remain rivals. Instead of battling for new territory, why don't we merge our existing lines?"

"Why don't we, Lex?"

HE left the Fulton office with determination and direction firing the energies within him. A merger with Fulton, ridding both of them of useless and destructive friction, making the Adams tie-up not something to be fought over, but to be shared with certainty! And beyond that a greater merger, of which as yet he scarcely dared think.

Yet he knew well that his real enemies had him backed into a tight corner in which he would have to pull off a near miracle in order to reach these new and bright objectives. There was still a bitter fight ahead if he was even to survive. There was still a boy in Logtown who would be hanged summarily unless the real criminals were taken soon.

He was certain now that he knew who they were, and the problem was to expose them and to retrieve the pilfered treasure. He had one real advantage. Clement, Duncan and Hamley had known that the dust substitutions would be revealed in not too great a time, and had planned ambitiously to profit from that when it came. Lex did not know where Clement was, now, but at their hinterland posts, Duncan and Hamley might not yet know that the big development had come. He might be able to take a trick or two by surprising them before they learned of it.

The crowd before the Quigley Express office had increased in size, if anything, and Lex steered clear of it and beat a hasty retreat along the sidestreets. Checking, he learned that no small craft had gone up the American as yet, that morning, nor were any readying. Hope mounted in him. Within the hour he was on a livery horse and pounding across the flat Sacramento valley toward the foothills and Placerville.

This route carried him away from
(Continued on page 84)

THE FIDDLER

Burn sprang forward, snatched the fiddle, brought it crashing down upon the Texan's head.



FOR a trigger-wise cowpoke looking for the man who murdered his uncle, Fiddler Dixon seemed downright careless as he ambled into Hyattville astride Big Red, gaunt and grizzled and dusty. There was only one excuse for his heedless behavior. The Fiddler had never seen the man he hunted.

With sober brown eyes he scanned the weather-stained false fronts along the dwarfed street, the empty board walks, the clusters of riderless horses drowsing at the rails in the October sun. Presently his glance lifted to the hammered heights of the Big Horns peering over the shoulders of the huddled stores.

"Well, Red, look it over," Fiddler directed. "You are invadin' the bailiwick of Mister Burn Walton, one hombre we've a smart of business with. They warned us at Worland to keep out of the lion's den but we want a look at the lion first, don't we?"

The leggy gelding plodded on sleepily, making soft gray explosions in the powdery road. Responding to a nudge, he

PAYS OFF . . .



By
ADOLPH REGLI

This mysterious galoot who called himself Fiddler Dixon could make more than one kind of music—he could play songs with six-guns when it was necessary. . .

turned in before the One-Two-Three saloon's tie-rack and stopped.

Like a man long in the saddle, Fiddler Dixon stepped down stiffly and then tugged at a black fiddle case tied to his bedroll. Finding it still secure, he swung around and caught his image in the bar-room window. What he saw disgusted

him. He looked like a chucklehead—his holsters empty, a green scarf around his neck, his flat cheeks screened by a blond stubble which added a decade to his twenty-two years. The get-up—even to his name—was a fake and he hated it.

Still, he couldn't overlook a bet. He wouldn't know Burn Walton if he found

him in his pocket; at the same time, he was a marked man. The news had preceded him—he'd heard it at Shoshoni, at Thermopolis, again at Manderson. They were saying, "Some young punk from Texas is on the prod for Burn Walton and, pardner, Burn's sure laying for the Arbuckle."

When he heard that, Fiddler let his beard grow and slopped around like a chuckline rider.

He wasn't repeating a near-blunder he made at Kirby where he pulled his guns on an inquisitive rancher. That mistake taught him a lesson. To keep his nervous fingers out of mischief, he wrapped his rods in his bedroll, and since then he'd passed for a harmless drifter.

HE stepped under the saloon's wooden canopy just as the swinging doors split open and a cowhand staggered onto the sidewalk.

"Howdy, pardner," the cowpoke belovled. "You wanna buy a pal—" At once his drink-weary eyes narrowed in doubtful recognition. "Say, ain't you Trigger Carroll from the Panhandle?"

Startled, Fiddler discouraged him with a bland smile. "It's a funny thing—I've been accused of that before. Feller asked me that down at Douglas. This Trigger must be a somebody."

The man glanced at Fiddler's empty holsters. "I put the saddle on the wrong horse, pardner. I saw Trigger down in Tascosa give a rowdy a haircut at thirty paces without itching his scalp. He's a shooting fool once he's crossed, and I hear tell he's got plenty notches on his grip. He'll pull an iron before you can draw a breath."

"I'll tell him I met you."

Leaving the perplexed cowboy, Fiddler entered the saloon, crossed the room and asked the slack-faced barkeeper for a drink.

While waiting for the bottle, he gazed about. He noted several poker tables against the front wall, the sturdy armchairs, the enameled cuspidors beside the table legs. A shaft of sunlight dusted with smoke fell across a scarred upright

piano at the far end of the room. Four cowmen played cards quietly; a handful of others chatted at the bar. All ignored the Fiddler.

Pouring himself a second drink, he caught the eye of the loose-jawed bartender. "Where'll I find Burn Walton?"

"He's usually here and about this time-a-day. If you stay hobbled, you'll see him." His face clouded with disapproval. "Won't do no good to ask him for a job, though. He don't take on drifters. He picks his bunch and they're all easy on the trigger."

"Mister Walton must be a big auger hereabouts."

The barkeep grunted. "Burn kin buy or sell anybody and anything he wants between Basin and Tensleep, stranger. His Triple L runs from here to hell and gone. Some months back he bought—so he says, anyway—the Bar U what butts his line on the north. Tomorrow he's marrying Kathy Shannon, and that's the same as marrying the Broad Angle what ties up to the Bar U. Then he'll have his hobbles on the whole valley. You can sure make up your mind, stranger, Burn Walton is a powerful big auger. It don't pay none to feed off his range unless you kin help it."

Fiddler studied his drink. "Right interestin' feller. Think maybe I'll look around and see how he operates." His glance fell on the piano. "Do you mind if I coax a few tunes from your mothbox? I'm lonesome for the sound of prairie music."

"Hell, no! That thing ain't turned a wheel in weeks. Not since our ivory pounder hit the trail with Bess, a gal Burn Walton once was sweet on. Help yourself—only lay off when Burns comes in. He's techy on the subject of music-makers. In fact, he's plum hostile to the breed."

"Right interestin'." Fiddler left the bar and sat at the piano, his back to the door. Experimentally, he ran his supple fingers across the yellowed keys before striking up "Little Joe, the Wrangler." He followed that with "The Old Chisholm Trail," "Sam Bass" and "The Gol-Darned

The judge shouted: "This is the most high-handed thing I ever heard of! Why . . . it's highway robbery, that's what it is!"



Wheel." His fingers hadn't forgotten.

Absorbed in his music, he paid no attention to the growing barroom traffic. He was fingering the lively notes of "Bonnie Black Bess" when six men trooped in.

HE felt rather than heard someone behind him. Automatically, he drummed on. A wiry body cut the pillar of sunlight slanting across his shoulders. Alert now, Fiddler raised his head.

He glimpsed a swift, shadowy motion. With brutal force, a heavy fist cracked against his chin. Consciousness flicked out momentarily.

Fiddler found himself face down on the floor with the piano stool nestling against his ribs. Painfully, the fog in his brain dissolved. He jerked his hands from his empty holsters and colored in embarrassment.

His eyes carried to the strutting back of a man walking away from him. At the bar the man turned and Fiddler saw contempt on his saddle-brown face, in his cruel black eyes and on the lift of his jet mustache, clipped short. No one had to tell him that this was Burn Walton, the man he hunted.

As Fiddler watched, Burn tapped a bar-

rel-bellied citizen on the chest. White eyebrows stood out on the man's fat face like chalk marks on a tanned cowhide and he listened as one paid to give attention.

"Now don't you dare forget, judge," Fiddler heard Burn command. "I want you at the Broad Angle at noon, prompt. I don't want anything to interfere with my wedding tomorrow. Understand?"

"Sure, Burn, sure," Judge Morrow replied. "I can see how it is. I'll bring along the license. Don't worry."

Fiddler got up sluggishly, giving his brain time to clear. He thrust aside the overturned stool and walked slowly toward Burn Walton. Burn's five riders crowded close around him.

Their expressions dangerously calm, the youngster and the rancher watched each other coldly. Fearless, alert, cautious, they stood with eyes on the same piercing level.

"Well, Mister Walton, you introduce yourself right forceful. Is that the custom in this country?"

"Who the hell are you? What are you doing here?" Burn's black mustache bristled, like a cat full of anger.

The Texan pushed out his full lips in resignation. "Since you put it that way, I won't keep you waitin'! Some call me one thing, some another, but to you I'm Fiddler Dixon. And I'm in Wyomin' on business, personal business, concernin' you and me."

Burn Walton's smooth cheeks tightened with impatience. "Why you crackpot piano player, I never saw you before in my life. What affair have I got with you?"

Suddenly the rancher's dark eyes widened and Fiddler saw them flood with shocked understanding. They narrowed quickly as though to hide the thoughts behind them but Fiddler knew Burn Walton was aware "the young punk on the prod" had arrived.

"Then I guess maybe I'll have to refresh your memory." Fiddler glanced around the room. The card players had stopped their game; the men at the bar stood poised in rigid attention. The five riders held warning glares on the

stranger. The tension was most evident.

Turning crystal with coldness, Fiddler's brown eyes sought to trap Burn's shifting glance. "I had an uncle, a plumb honest gent named Matt Legarus, who met a sad death down in Texas a few months back. His ranchhouse burned down one night—with Matt in it. It looked like a sorrowful tragedy until the sheriff found a bullet hole in Matt's head. Then it was plain he'd been murdered and—"

"What's all this got to do with me?" Burn scoffed. "What do I care about your damned uncle?"

"I was just comin' to that. You see, he owned a ranch here near Hyattville—he called it the Bar U—and because I was his only kin, he figured I'd get it. Sure enough, he put it in his will, so I came to Wyomin' to look her over. I thought maybe if I liked what I saw, I'd settle down."

Burn Walton laughed disdainfully. "You're talking heifer dust. The Bar U is my ranch—and I'm keeping it. Just what is your game, anyway?"

Unruffled, Fiddler fished in his shirt pocket and drew out two folded papers. "Why, Mister Walton, it's no game and you don't have to take my word for it. I've got proof—legal proof. I've got the will and deed right here and we can let the judge look them over to see that they're all right and proper—"

Burn snatched the papers from Fiddler's hand. Without taking his smoldering black eyes from the Texan's face, he ripped them to pieces and flung them to the floor with an oath.

"Listen here, Fiddler—or whatever you call yourself. There's only one law in this valley. I'm it. Deeds and wills are no-account scraps of paper as far as I'm concerned. Because you're a half-witted greener and don't know enough to pack a six-gun, I'm letting you ride easy. Now you get on your horse and ride and don't stop until you're out of sight of the Big Horns. If you delay too long, my boys will attend the last rites."

FACING Burn stubbornly, Fiddler held his voice low. "I haven't finished my story, Mister Walton."

"I've heard all I'm going to stand for. Are you riding?" Burn's men closed around Fiddler.

"Just one more minute of your time, Mister Walton. I was down to Dallas when my uncle was murdered so I missed some of the details but I heard he had a caller the night his house burned. He wasn't seen again. The feller wore a black mustache, clipped short. I've been hankerin' ever since to meet him."

He saw the rancher's cruel eyes glare with fury, his leather-brown face harden with hate. "Why, you— Are you accusing me of—" He couldn't speak the condemning words. Guilt flushed his cheeks and Fiddler had seen enough.

"Guess I don't have to. You're doin' right well yourself."

"I ought to shoot you down like a horse thief," Burn roared. "If you only had a gun on you—"

"I can arrange that, Mister Walton. Since you're the law in these parts, I'm servin' notice on the law that I want my property. I'll wear shootin' irons when I claim it."

He turned so abruptly he stepped on the toe of a Walton man crowding him. Angered, the rider threw a punch which Fiddler dodged. With the same motion, the Texan swung a left hook which caught the man on the neck, sending him sprawling.

Without looking back, Fiddler continued out the door to his horse. He thrust a hand into his bedroll, drew out two ivory-handled Colts and dropped them into his holsters. Then he lifted himself to his saddle.

"Red, we're goin' callin' on a lady. Uncle Matt always said, don't ever get mixed up with females, but we've got to disregard him this once. Another visitor'll show up at her headquarters before the evenin's over, like or not, and we want to be there. Get movin', Red. We made contact with our man—and it hurt."

AT a free gait, Fiddler followed the dusty road which wriggled upward toward Paintrock canyon. About him the sparse sage made a gray-green

With catlike thrusts, Burn flung his hands to his pistols, and he drew them, too.



platform above the starved desert. In a sheltered hollow ahead, a cove of quaking aspens shivered in their October gold.

Far to the right he noticed Paintrock creek lined by a thread of cottonwoods and rabbit-bush curling down from the hills. It coursed through the Bar U ranch, assuring sweet water and sweet grass for its herd. Any cattleman would covet that spread of lush rangeland. Fiddler could see why Burn Walton, beholding it day after day with envious eyes, would have it at any price, including murder.

He turned off the trail toward the Broad Angle headquarters sprawled in the lee of a craggy butte. Amid the deep violet shadows he distinguished the main ranchhouse under a lofty cottonwood, the bunkhouse a hundred yards beyond, a pole corral, the stable, the big pen and several sheds.

Reining in beside the log ranchhouse,

he stared at a large capable woman hanging a dishtowel on the porch line. "Good evenin', ma'am. Are you—you're Miss Shannon?"

The woman laughed. "Thanks, stranger. I'm the housekeeper."

Relieved, he asked, "Is Miss Shannon at home?"

"Not yet. She's at Tabin's to fetch her wedding gown. She'll be along soon—with Burn Walton, more than likely." She became suspicious suddenly. "Why? What do you want with her?"

"Well, I—I thought maybe she needed another rider."

"See Jig Rivers at the bunkhouse. He's the range boss."

"Thank you, ma'am." He rode toward a smudge of yellow light which marked the open door of the cowboys' quarters. A thin tight-lipped individual about to enter stopped to regard him with cool indifference.

"Evenin'," Fiddler said. "I'm lookin' for Jig Rivers."

"I'm Jig," he growled down the stem of a black pipe.

"I figured maybe you could use another cowhand."

"I'm not taking on new help till I size up the situation after the wedding. Burn Walton will have the say then, I reckon."

"I see. Well, Red's a mite leg-weary and both of us could stand some chuck. Have you room for my bedroll tonight?"

"You're late for supper but maybe Sam can rustle up something. Step down."

Watched by a crowd of curious ranchhands, Fiddler untied his fiddle case and lifted the bedroll from Big Red. After stabling and feeding the horse, he returned to the kitchen and ate heartily of the cook's beef and beans. Soon he joined the bunkhouse group starting a game of cards.

Jig Rivers looked up when Fiddler entered. He jerked his head toward a row of belts and pistols hanging on the wall. "We don't wear irons in the house, stranger. It's a ranch rule."

Fiddler hesitated. He hadn't expected that. If he refused, he would arouse every man's suspicion yet he knew that dis-

armed he exposed himself recklessly. He expected trouble when Burn Walton showed up and he didn't aim to sidestep it this time. Still, Jig Rivers was the boss here. Fiddler unstrapped his holsters and hung his Colts on an empty peg.

When he turned around, he saw Jig eyeing his fiddle case. "If you play that thing, you can pay for supper with a tune or two."

"Why, sure," Fiddler agreed. While he plunked the strings to tune up, the cowhands scattered to sit along the wall.

Completely at ease, Fiddler rested a haunch on the table, his toes tapping the boards gently. He played "Poor Lonesome Cowboy," "Billy the Kid," a dozen other range songs. His brown eyes moved slowly across the enchanted faces with far-away looks but always his roving glance went back to the door.

AT LAST he heard the swift beat of hoofs. Two riders stopped at the ranchhouse, a moment later one continued on and pulled up outside the door.

Burn Walton entered the room with firm strides.

He stopped at the threshold, dropped his hands to his six-guns, lifted them when he saw that the youth was unarmed.

Fiddler's sober stare was upon Burn but his arm moved rhythmically, never missing a note. He saw the rancher's tanned face chill with quick anger. The lower lip of his brutal mouth pushed his clipped mustache into a bristling roll.

Pausing only a moment, Burn stalked close to Fiddler. "Well, Music Man, you get around, don't you? Didn't I make it plain this afternoon you were to clear out? What're you doing here?"

Fiddler stopped in the middle of "The Great Roundup" and lowered his bow. "Right now I'm entertainin' the boys."

"None of your fresh talk. Look here, Fiddler. It isn't my habit to do much talking before I shoot. All right, get your bedroll and fiddle off my place."

"Your place?"

"None of your damn' business. Get moving."

"Now that's plumb unneighborly." Fiddler scraped the bow across the strings and saw the patience run out of Burn's face. He lowered the fiddle, unsure of the angry rancher's next move. "I want my property—the Bar U ranch. Do I have to kill the man who murdered my uncle to get it?"

Fiddler read distrust and fear on Burn Walton's drawn cheeks. He knew this man respected only the authority of a six-shooter—and Fiddler's guns hung on the wall a dozen feet away.

Without a word, Burn sprang forward, snatched the fiddle from the Texan's hand and brought it crashing down on his head. With a loud crack, it collapsed in a tangle of wood and strings.

"You had your chance to leave without trouble," Burn shouted. "Hike, damn you, before you're carried out of here."

Turning an angry red beneath his shaggy stubble, Fiddler cocked his left arm and lashed out at Burn. The jab traveled only two feet but it connected hard on a solid jaw. The rancher staggered back, tripped and sprawled on the floor, stunned for a moment.

Leaping for his pistols, Fiddler snapped the belt to his waist and faced Burn. The rancher bounded to his feet.

"I ought to cut you down like a rattler but I'm offerin' you a fair draw." Fiddler's voice was low and flat but it carried to everyone in the room. "All right, it's your move."

"Jig . . . Sam! Somebody grab this cockeyed lunatic!" Burn's cry was full of the fear of death, pitched with his guilt.

"You fellers stay out of this," Fiddler called. "My business is with this varmint."

Burn moved backward toward the door. "You're loco. I never saw your uncle."

"Don't take another step, my friend. It'll be your last."

A burdened hush closed over the bunkhouse, holding everyone motionless for a long minute. Then in measured tones Fiddler said, "Mister Walton, I came to Hyattville in a reasonable mood

but I can't stomach a ramrod who'll mix murder, marriage, and thievin' to eat honest men off the range. Up till now you held a nice hand but the only trouble is, you've got just one draw."

"Get the hell out of here."

"I'm goin' to save Kathy Shannon from—"

Brisk steps on the hard earth outside carried through the strained stillness of the bunkhouse. They stopped abruptly.

FIDDLER shifted his gaze beyond Burn and saw a young woman, a slender brunette, standing in the doorway. She wore boots, a brown riding skirt, a blue scarf across her shoulders. He noted the surprise in her round gray-green eyes, the high color in her small oval face.

"Oh!" Kathy Shannon exclaimed. "We have a visitor. I wondered what delayed you, Burn. Aren't you coming to the house?"

Fiddler noticed her puzzled survey of the grim-faced ranchhands. She stiffened, aware of the tension in the room. "Burn, what's wrong here?"

Fiddler answered, "Ma'am, I have some dealin's of a difficult nature with Mister Walton. Will you kindly remain outside?"

"Kathy," Burn said, not turning his head, "we've got a crazy man here. See if you can—"

She stepped between the two, facing Fiddler. He saw perplexity and wonder in her olive eyes and was aware of her pensive beauty. He drew a quick breath and felt himself grow warm, then cold, as though his blood had drained into his boots. No woman had ever affected him like this.

She looked into his grizzled face and said, not unkindly, "Who are you? What do you want here?"

"Ma'am, that—that's a fairly long story. I was—"

Burn moved behind the girl so that she stood in the way of the man who wanted to kill him. Fiddler saw triumph in his twisted mouth and in the bold dark eyes which mocked him.

"I guess you'll change your mind now, you punk," Burn gloated.

"I don't understand," the girl said. "What's the trouble?"

Fiddler lowered his eyes to Kathy. He knew he was beaten. He couldn't shoot Burn Walton, or any man, in front of her.

He turned slowly, walked to his bedroll, picked it up and went out into the black autumn night.

STILL reviling himself for his weakness, Fiddler Dixon sat before a campfire on Paintrock creek some hours later. The face of Kathy Shannon was before him; it had been there ever since he had left the Broad Angle headquarters in disgrace.

His weeks of weary riding and prying had been wasted. He had found his man, he had had his chance to avenge his uncle, he had thrown it away. And for a woman. Strangely, he felt glad that he had not shown himself a killer in front of the girl, yet that questionable satisfaction did not ease the guilt of his conduct when he had Burn Walton at the point of his six-guns.

Suddenly Big Red, grazing beyond the rim of camplight, whinnied. A horse answered from the deep darkness.

Startled, Fiddler raised his head. Suspicion spurred him into action. Leaping up, he swung his booted foot against the fire, sweeping it into the creek. An instant later he flung himself into the grass just beyond his tiny campsite.

A volley of rifle shots rattled across the creek. Half a dozen bullets gouged into the soft earth where Fiddler stood a second before. More shots exploded. Hooves beat the range.

Before the horsemen had reached the creek, Fiddler ran to his big gelding, cinched up and raced along the valley, seeking the shelter of the canyon back in the hills. He rode for many minutes before resting his powerful mount.

When certain the ambushers had withdrawn, he sighed thankfully and said, "Well, Red, Burn Walton's bunch nearly dry-gulched us that time. Now we've got to figure out a new way to grab the jerkline. We can't go to Burn; we'll bring him to us."

He dismounted and prepared a cold camp in a little hollow against the canyon wall. "We must pay more heed to Uncle Matt, Red. We had Burn dead-cinched tonight but we bogged down when we saw calico." He sighed. "She's one elegant gal, Red."

THE sun was high and warm next morning before Fiddler left his shelter. Far out on the plain he saw a buckboard jostling toward the Broad Angle behind two fast-stepping bays. Even from a distance he recognized the huge body of Judge Morrow. He cut down a draw and waited behind a knoll bordering the trail.

When abreast of the carriage, he swung out, startling the driver. "Mornin', judge," he called. "Excuse me, but I must have a word about a matter troublin' me. I'm—"

The judge arched his white eyebrows until he looked like an owl but he shook his reins for more speed. "Can't stop now, stranger. Got to be at a wedding this noon."

Fiddler loped beside the rig. "But, judge, my business can't wait. It's powerful important."

"Can't be as important as Burn Walton's wedding. See me in town this evening—Hey, there! What are you doing? Stop it!"

As the judge shouted, Fiddler closed in on the bays and halted them. Squeezing into the seat, he held Big Red's reins.

"Get out of this buckboard! I'll blow you out—" The judge withdrew his hand when a muzzle dug into his fat side.

"I said my affair was plumb urgent, judge. Turn around."

"This is the most high-handed thing I ever heard of! Why, it's . . . it's highway robbery, that's what it is."

"Call it kidnagin'—more refined. Hurry up, turn around."

"Say, can't you understand? I'm going to officiate at Burn Walton's wedding. If I don't show up at noon, he'll be in town looking for me and there'll be hell to pay."

"That's the way I figured it, too. I've got some unfinished business with Mister

Walton and I want you on hand to see that it's carried out accordin' to law. Burn Walton's kind of law. He tried it on me last night and it nearly worked."

"Say, talk sense, will you? What's this all about?"

"See, judge, I knew you'd be interested. Right off, I want you to know my legal name's Andrew Carroll, sometimes known as Trigger. I came here seekin' justice, but you saw Burn Walton tear up my evidence—the deed and will. It seems Judge Colt is the only magistrate some folks recognize around here. All right, I can work in that court, too."

"You'd better not mix it with Burn. He'll kill you."

"Only if he can shoot faster and straighter than I can. I'll wait for him at the One-Two-Three saloon. When he shows up, I'll ask him once more for my ranch. If he won't listen to reason, he'll hear my six-guns but I never shoot till the other feller makes the first reach. You be there, judge, to watch the rules."

"You're a fool. Nobody's ever stood up to Burn and lived to tell it. If you're wise, you'll skip out of Hyattville."

The Texan wasn't listening. "Say, you don't suppose Kathy Shannon will ride in to see what's up? I hadn't thought of that—" He rubbed his shaggy chin. "I hope we have time for a shave and haircut before we entertain Mister Walton."

TRIGGER CARROLL sat at the One-Two-Three piano playing range songs. He had turned it around to face the door. His flat cheeks freshly shaved and his hair trimmed close, he appeared almost boyish. The ivory handles of two pistols stuck from his holster. He sat alert, keen, yet nonchalant. All trace of Fiddler Dixon had vanished.

Now and then his brown eyes lifted across the piano toward the entrance. He glanced once at a row of men standing with backs to the bar, silent and expectant. He singled out Judge Morrow, whose hoary eyebrows were arched in pained tension.

"Judge, do you reckon he'll be along soon?"

"I reckon so."

He idled away another minute before going no. "Now, like I told you gents, I'll have no hindrance in my play. If any of you are friends of Burn Walton, keep your hands above your belts. I'll give Burn a chance to give up my property peaceful. I should shoot him in the back for murderin' my uncle, but I'm no coyote. Still and all, I'll throw lead the first reach Burn makes and I'll shoot to kill." He paid attention once more to his melancholy songs as though he were alone.

He looked up when the plop of rushing hoofs sounded in the street. He heard several horses slide to a stop . . . the tread of willful boots on the walk . . . the creak of the swinging doors.

Burn Walton paused in the entrance. Five riders crowded behind him. Sighting Judge Morrow, Burn rasped, "Judge, what do you mean by crossing me this way?" He took a step into the barroom. "I told you to be at the ranch by noon. It's now—"

The soft, slow notes of "The Dying Cowboy" came from the piano. His eyes just above the scarred mahogany, Trigger Carroll saw Burn whirl angrily, recognize him, and start in his direction. Burn's bunch moved closer, too.

Warily, Trigger got up, walked around the piano and stood against it. A dozen paces away Burn halted, his eyes violently dark, his clipped mustache flat.

"You— What are you doing here?"

"Playin' the piano—and waitin' for you."

"Look here, lunkhead. You're fixing yourself to make Hyattville your permanent residence. Over in Little Butte cemetery. You've got just two minutes to get on your horse and ride. If you take three, it'll be too late."

Trigger moved his hands until they hung loosely in front of him. "I guess maybe I won't, Mister Walton. I'm beginnin' to like it here. But I'll need a place to live, so I'm askin' you this once more for the Bar U ranch. Just speak up; there's lots of witnesses and the judge can make note of it."

(Continued on page 90)

A COWARD DIES A

*It takes but a split second to make a decision,
even when the stakes are life and death!*

GLEN BARTER stood back from the bleak window of the small hotel room. Stood back in the shadows so that Cristy Daggart, down on the street, wouldn't spot his shaking figure.

would be puddling the dust before another ten minutes were over.

"He'll kill me!" Barter whispered hoarsely. "I ain't got a chance. He'll kill me!"

Cristy Daggart had a rep for a fast



*She watched the mangy cur skulk
after the young bartender.*

The sun was setting, a golden ball plunging through rippling clouds the color of blood. Blood! Barter's own blood

THOUSAND TIMES

By FRANK D. COMPAGNON

draw. Glen Barter was just a good-natured, soft-spoken young bartender, a newcomer to Trail City. The kind every proprietor was looking for—a man who could mix drinks fast and never touched liquor himself.

Barter had walked into a good job here in the bustling cowtown. Right across the street from the hotel, at the Silver Dollar Casino. He was due there now, to start a night shift. But down there, leaning against a canopy post of the casino, was Daggart blocking his way. Barter had gotten Cristy's job. The ex-barkeep, discharged for drunkenness, was out to kill Barter.

The main street was almost deserted except for the tall, cold-looking figure dressed in black. But Barter knew a hundred eyes were watching from safe vantage points. Bets were being placed on the outcome between the cunning bully

and the young newcomer.

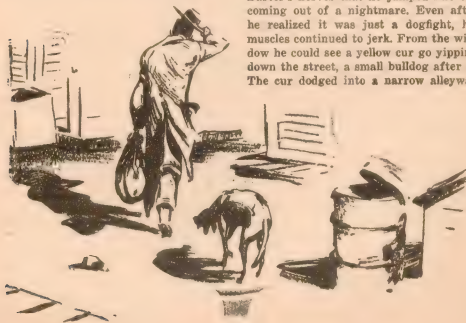
Daggart's white hands were hanging loosely by the black-buttoed guns. His peaked Stetson was casting a long, pointed shadow on the ground. Barter forced his eyes upward, stared across the tops of ugly frame buildings into the flaming sky. Sundown! Sundown for him. What chance would he have!

Cold shadows would soon be creeping out of the foothills to lay their purple fingers across the little cattle town.

It was time to meet Cristy Daggart or be branded yellow!

BARTER stood there, frozen. The sweat that oozed from his pores felt deathly cold on his skin. His hands, steady and sure in mixing drinks, shook so that he doubted his ability even to pull his six-gun from leather without dropping it.

Sudden yelps split the air. So taut were Barter's nerves that he jumped like one coming out of a nightmare. Even after he realized it was just a dogfight, his muscles continued to jerk. From the window he could see a yellow cur go yipping down the street, a small bulldog after it. The cur dodged into a narrow alleyway



leading back of the hotel. The bulldog gave up the chase, apparently well satisfied with having routed a mongrel four times larger. With quick, hot shame Barter identified the yellow dog with himself.

Another sound followed upon the final bark of the bulldog. The long, melancholy whistle of the five-fifty train. Barter listened, fascinated. His breath came in gulps. Escape! He'd run out. For a full minute he fought with himself, going through a mental agony worse than death.

With a final groan he gave in. Scooping up his few possessions he crammed them into a carpetbag and slunk out of his room.

There'd be plenty of curious hombres down in the lobby. Sheriff Stone would be conspicuously absent. The old leatherneck considered some affairs as being strictly private and in such cases became strangely deaf to all the talk going on around him. Barter skulked down a side hall to a back stairway. Downstairs he slipped along a corridor that led by the dining room to a back entrance. He turned a corner—stopped dead still.

There, standing in his way, was Jacqueline White, cashier in the hotel dining-room. The last rays of the sun streaming through a window pane flooded her honey-colored hair. Her lips were redder than the crimson of the sunset.

"Goodbye, Barty," she said. "The train leaves in ten minutes."

Barter's cheeks felt as if they were being branded.

"Jackie! I . . . I just decided . . . I mean—" he stammered, stopped before her direct gaze.

"You knew all the time you'd run out. Cristy knew it. Everybody in Trail City knows you've quit a dozen good jobs. Things like that follow a man."

"What d'yuh want me to do?" he demanded bitterly, "I get out—and I'm a yellow coward. I stay—and get six feet of ground. A hell of a choice!"

Her red lips turned up.

"Barty, you're meat for bullies. They can spot your type. Some day you'll have

to face one. You can't run away forever."

A hot hurting came into the young bartender's throat as the words pouring from the vermilion lips struck home.

"All right," he told her. "I'll go back. I'll go out in the street." He searched her face for a sign of sympathy. Saw nothing but scornful anger. "I guess you know—" he tried to keep his voice from falling into a whine—"how . . . how it'll turn out."

"Stop being a martyr!" she snapped. "A martyr's nothing but a coward with frills!"

Barter stared into her lovely face. Her eyes forced his own down, until he hung his head.

"Listen, Barty—" she put her hand on his arm. Her touch was like a hot iron to him. "Here's something: '*Cowards die many times, The valiant taste of death but once*'—! Remember that, Barty. Shakespeare wrote that. A long time ago. He knew people. People like you and me. You've died many times. A thousand times you've died—going through all the agony of death in your mind. I'm sorry for you, Barty."

Two short whistles stabbed the air. The train was pulling into Trail City. Jacqueline White stepped away, opened the door for Barter to go through.

"I was beginning to like you, Barty," she said frankly.

For one long moment he stood there, racked by the agony of indecision as the meaning of her final words came home to him. But an emotion stronger than his weak will made him stumble out into the alley.

The mangy cur, cowering near a garbage pail, seemed to sense a kindred soul. With tail hung low, it skulked after the young bartender.

THE SETH THOMAS regulator drearily ticked away the seconds in the almost deserted waiting room of the station. Feverishly Barter bought a ticket for a town a hundred miles upstate. He glanced about furtively while the agent thumbed through the rack for

the proper pasteboard. Everyone was outside.

Barter jammed the ticket into his hatband with nervous fingers, then made his way to the platform. For a moment he hesitated, sickening at the thought of someone he might know catching him in the act of running out. He saw a dozen old villagers, who never failed to see the train in, and a few passengers from the coaches stretching their legs. Barter realized that the young bucks of Trail City had gotten wind of the shoot-out and were all uptown to see the fun.

Inside the wooden coaches he could see the red plush seats. Another minute and he'd be in one of them; the train would be pulling away from this accursed cattle town. He'd be safe from Cristy Daggart. He'd get another job. There'd be another girl—

A coward dies many times. Yes, that was right. Wherever he went there'd be another Cristy Daggart. But there wouldn't be another Jackie! He could still go back. Die, knowing she would consider him more of a man.

The portly conductor was snapping shut the case of his heavy gold watch. The brakeman signaled the engineer. With a sudden snort the high-wheeled engine came to life. The train jerked forward.

A passenger threw the last of his ham sandwich under the coach and clambered aboard. The conductor swung up after him.

Sweat flooded Barter's temples. In his mind he saw the cold muzzle of Daggart's .44; the crafty, confident face behind it. He couldn't face it! He had to get away. His mind was going to pieces. Groaning, he started for the steps of the slowly moving coach.

The yellow cur, still at Barter's heels, darted under the car, bit hungrily at the leavings. A youngster in patched jeans watched, fascinated. The train was picking up speed. Barter could not tear his own eyes away from the dog, cowering now as the undergear of the coaches rolled above him.

Confused, the cur swung from one

side to the other. Barter was hypnotized. Fear in its eyes, the dog made a miscalculated leap for safety. The truck wheels caught its hind legs, ground across them.

The shrill howl of anguish coming from the poor animal stabbed into Barter, sickened him. His whole frame trembled as the mongrel dragged its blood-drenched hindquarters out into the open. The boy's mouth quivered. He instinctively covered his ears to shut out those heart-rending howls.

"Mister! Can't you do something!" The boy was imploring Barter.

Do something? The last coach of the combination train was rolling by. He'd have to run for it. But still he stared at the piteous spectacle of the dog trying to drag itself across the platform, its pain-filled eyes beseeching.

The young bartender let his carpetbag drop. His right hand slapped at the six-gun in the little-used holster. He brought the gun down on the cur, eared back the hammer. The Colt bucked in his hand. The dog sighed gently, rolled over, its agony ended.

The button looked up at Barter gratefully.

"Gee, mister, you're a real shot."

A real shot! Barter looked at the heap of brown and yellow. He had drilled the mangy cur straight through the head. As easily and expertly as he would arc a flaming blue blazer from one decanter to another, to the admiration of patrons. He had a sure and steady touch, a good, quick eye. He was plenty good—until fear knotted up his muscles.

The hum of fast-moving wheels on the iron rails brought him to his senses. The train was a hundred yards away. For some strange reason Barter's heart did not pound at the discovery. Slowly he started to put up his smoking six-gun. He hesitated; broke the .44 and replaced the spent cartridge. Holstered the gun.

The yellow dog had died its last time. Barter, too, had but one more time to die. One physical death could not be as bad as a hundred mental ones. He would go back and shoot it out with Cristy Dag-

(Continued on page 92)

TIMBER TRAP

By HENRY NORTON

What kind of skulduggery was behind the great quantity of logs that were somehow being stolen from these Oregon woods? It was Con Martin's very difficult job to find the answer in the middle of man's and nature's quite different kinds of savagery. . . .

NOWHERE does violent death come more violently than in a logging operation—unless, indeed, it be the very heart of battle. There is a raw, untamed savagery about a logging accident, as if inanimate things had been suddenly awakened with a lust to kill. Things happen more bloodily than necessary, as if death were making doubly sure of its victim.

It's hard to ascribe any blame to the average logging death. A spar tree splits at the top while the highclimber's safety belt is still around it, and the man is yanked to the bosom of the spar and squashed like a bug on a chip. A hemlock snag comes down, silent as only a hemlock can, and drives a man to the ground. Act of God, you'd say, if you believed in that kind of god.

On this particular day at Randall's Camp Three, it was a broken haulback. Con Martin had been scaling over on the other side of the ridge. Coming back, he'd stopped on the crest to watch the logging show laid out in the valley below him. It was a layout of brutal power. It took power to handle the massive spruce logs they were taking out of Camp Three—great forest giants ten to thirteen feet through at the butt, with smooth silver-gray sides that remembered the storms of centuries. Their light, strong wood was going into training planes, thousands of them, and getting the timber out was a hurry-up job.

THE scene Con Martin stood watching was a hurry-up job too—a highball, high-lead logging show, going

at a dead run. A steam donkey engine sat by the railroad spur, with a tall spar tree close by. The mainline from the engine's drum ran to the top of the spar, and then for a thousand or so yards out to the valley where the fallen logs lay scattered. The mainline was pulled out to the woods by a lighter line, the haulback, which ran through a tailblock or pulley across the logging area. At the end of the mainline were massive chains called chokers. These, set around the great logs as they lay, pulled them crashing through the brush and bouncing over rocks and rough ground up to the cold-decked pile of logs that lay around the spar tree, waiting to be loaded onto railroad cars. When the logs were in and the chokers released, the haulback came tight, and the mainline went snaking out into the woods to bring in another load.

Rudy Garberino was punching donkey, and Rudy was one engineer who moved a fast line. On this trip the mainline burned back into the brush with the chokers flying like whips. They made no sound to Con Martin, for all small sounds were obscured to him by the thundering of steam in the donkey engine. He saw the chokers flail wildly, swing out against a massive stump.

And in some impossible fashion, the heads of the chokers met around the stump, clung, and as the haulback pulled them, they locked tight. The haulback yanked out straight, like a fishline when a big salmon strikes it. It lifted to the level of a man's waist across the dip of the valley. It quivered tautly; the chokers pulled out in line with it; the voice of



The Walker reached down to turn the man's severed head face upward.

the donkey engine rose to an angry bel-
low as the strain went into the drum.

"Something's got to give!" Con Mar-
tin said aloud.

The mainline was inch-and-seven-
eighths cored steel; the chokers were
heavy forged chain. It was the haulback
that gave. It parted close to its splice
on the mainline. The donkey engine
gasped in explosive relief, and then the

air was filled with an angry humming
as the haulback cable came to life.

From being tautly stretched, it van-
ished—so quickly did it move that for a
moment the eye could not follow it. All
there was to see was the vast commotion
of the brush, beaten flat as the maddened
line lashed back against the tension that
had held it. The whistle on the donkey
gave a frighened squeal, but it was too

late. That line was like a thing of hate.

The men to either side of the line who flung themselves face downward were safe that way, but only because they were already safe. For the line did not lash sideways. It went screaming up in a high arc, straight out toward the tail-block. A man was standing a hundred yards beyond the block, in a spot no one would have called dangerous. The broken end of the haulback lashed at him, coiling now so that the end was writing shining circles in the sunlit air. He could not have seen it coming more than a fraction of a second before it reached him.

He too, fell down into the soft forest loam. But as his body struck, his head rolled a little way. The cable end had cut him with the strength and precision of a headman's ax.

The donkey whistle squalled again, a series of short frantic notes that could be mistaken for no woods signal but trouble. From down at the loading platform, men came running. A nearby team of fallers left their saw in a cut and came down the slope.

Con Martin ran toward the fallen man, his caked boots biting recklessly into windfalls and soil alike. He was farthest away, but he was within one of being first on the scene.

THE WALKER got there first. Bul of the woods; camp superintendent; the push. They called him all these things, but mostly they called him the Walker, because he was always on the move through the many and complex operations of Camp Three. His name was Cecil Billings, and it was no great shakes of a name for a man who stood six feet five and measured two axhandles and a plug of chewing tobacco across the shoulders. His strength was bunkhouse legend, legend of the Paul Bunyan variety. How he had lifted one end of a log car to release a man trapped under it. How he'd been thrown from the top of a two hundred foot spar tree by lightning, and landed at the bottom with nothing more serious than a seat torn out of his pants.

How the log birling champion of the world had refused to contest with him on the whirling logs, because the Walker wanted to wear fifty pound weights on their waists so the loser would drown. What of it was truth and what legend. no one could say, but there was no man in Camp Three who cared to tackle him—and the Walker was sixty five years old.

He was bending over the dead man, closely scrutinizing his feet, paying no attention to his ghastly wound. He looked up and nodded briefly as Con Martin approached.

"This man was no logger," said the Walker. "Look at those boots."

Con Martin looked. The man's feet were encased in light leather hiking boots, with caulks driven into soles so thin the iron spike ends must have been close to coming through on the inside. Boots like that would last about three days on a logging job, and would make their wearer's feet plenty tender in less than that.

"He didn't wear logger's boots," Martin admitted.

The Walker said, "Then he wasn't a logger."

There wasn't a great deal to quarrel about in that statement. A man couldn't work in the woods without proper foot-gear. The brokest logger in the country, with a patch on the seat of his pants, would show up for work in a shining strong pair of boots. Most of them wore a seventeen-inch elkhide job, spring-heeled and heavily spiked with sharp steel caulks. Those, with stagged pants and a rainproof jacket, were standard equipment in the rainy Oregon woods, where the underbrush was dry for only a few weeks in the summer.

The rest of the crew was straggling up now; the choker setters and the whistle punk, the fallers and a pair of buckers from the timber beyond. The Walker reached down with steady hands to turn the severed head face upward.

"It's always the new hands that get into trouble," he grumbled. "I don't even know this fellow. Does anybody else here

know him? Do you, Martin?"

Con Martin looked down at the dead face of the man he had called two days ago and summoned to work at Camp Three—the man he had called to his death.

"No," he said. "I never saw him before."

CON MARTIN had been working at Camp Three for something less than a month. No one knew anything about him, but his availability certificate and draft status were in order, and it wasn't hard to get work in an industry starved for men. He was a quick and competent man, slenderly built with long, wiry muscles. The Walker had put him on the scaling job two days ago, over Con Martin's mild protest. Martin was a good scaler, but scaling took him away from the logging show; took him out to measure logs in the forest solitudes, and that did not fit into his reasons for being in the camp.

He was, to put it bluntly, a timber dick. He'd started out in a modest way some years ago in a general detective agency in Portland. From the start, he found his greatest success in cases connected with the Northwest's huge lumber industry. His ability to sift into the industry and handle any of the tough jobs connected with the business of logging and lumbering had enabled him to arrive at the solution of a number of troublesome cases.

There'd been the Murfree Logging Company case for one. Breakdowns had reduced the output of the company to virtually nothing, seemingly unavoidable material failures. Con Martin had worked there only a week before discovering the working of the amazingly simple sabotage system, starting in the blacksmith shop and including five men in its scope.

At Collins-Wickerham, it had been labor trouble, and an officious junior executive had lost his draft deferment as a result of Con Martin's report.

Here at Randall's Camp Three, the problem was loss of logs. Somewhere, from the time the trees were cut and



bucked into log lengths, about a tenth of the logs turned up missing. The company might have survived in peacetime, but their present contract was based on the report of government timber cruisers, and their estimate of what should be produced was enough higher than actual production, so that Randall's contract was hanging in the balance. With a stiff forfeiture clause on top of that.

"I'm no crybaby, Martin," old man Randall had said. "But there's something wrong with that setup; damn' wrong!" He'd scowled at the handsome paneling of his city office, fiddled with the tiny gold faller's ax he wore on his watch chain. "I can't find it. If you can't find it, I'll go broke, and that's the truth."

Martin had asked one question. "Who's your super?"

"The Walker," Randall had said. "If there's a better woods boss in the business, I don't know him. Why?"

"I can't do you any good if anybody knows me and knows why I'm there. It's okay, though; I don't know the Walker and he doesn't know me. I'll start right away."

That had been a month ago, and Con Martin was no closer to an answer now

than he'd been the first day he started to work. He'd signed on as choker setter, gone from that to chaser on the cold deck, unhooking the logs after they'd been yarded in. From that, the Walker made him scaler, taking him away from the logging operations.

To counter that bad break Con Martin had sent for Russ Knight to go to work as a choker setter. The big, likeable guy had reported for work two days ago. Last night he'd managed to tell Con Martin that there was something funny about the way they yarded the logs for loading—that they took them in what seemed a peculiar order. He hadn't been able to say just why it seemed peculiar, but he was going to try to get more information on it today.

Today, Russ Knight would gather no more information. He was dead in a logging accident, and death had smoothed the cocky grin from his face and stolen all thought and memory from his alert mind.

If it was an accident. Con Martin thought.

His reason told him it had to be an accident. He'd seen it happen with his own eyes. No murder could have been so contrived as to bring all the needed forces into play at the proper time. The place Russ had been standing, the haphazard tangling of the chokers, the parting of the haulback at just that spot; all these were part of it, and none were controllable by any one person.

THERE was a little crowd around the body now. The hook tender had arrived, boss of this particular crew. He was Pete Fromm, a big man with flat Slavic cheeks and cold blue eyes. He looked at the body and looked away again, with a little tightening of his throat muscles.

"Who is this man?" the Walker asked.

"Name was Knight," said Pete Fromm. "I put him on yesterday mornin'. Said he didn't know nothin' about loggin', but I needed a setter, so—"

"Why didn't you give him some decent boots?" said the Walker. "The com-

misary could stake him till payday."

"He'd be jus' as dead in new boots as in them," Pete Fromm said casually. "I don't baby my men. He said he'd make out, so I let him try."

"I'm not askin' you to baby anybody!" the Walker snapped. "A man's got to have proper gear to do a day's work, that's all."

"Where was the whistle punk when those chokers two-blocked on the snag?" Con Martin asked. "Why didn't he stop the donkey before the line broke?"

His question earned him a black look of anger from the whistle man. The man's name was John Scotto. He had a short leg, the result of a badly set childhood break. The deformity, though it had mended sturdily, gave him a grotesque gait, and it was owing to this that he had been given the whistle man's job.

The job was, briefly, to sit at the end of a long whistle cord run down to the woods, and signal the donkey engineer when to tighten the lines, when to slow, when to return the chokers, when to bring the logs slamming up to the spar. It was commonly called whistle punking, and it rated low in the scale of logging jobs, but a good deal depended on the whistle man's quickness of observation and judgment. Scotto was good at his job, particularly with a highball engineer like Rudy Garberino.

"How'd I know the line was gonna break?" Scotto demanded angrily. "Them binds usually pull themselves loose. Hell, if I stop the donk every time there's a lashup in the woods we'd never get no logs in."

Pete Fromm said, "Relax, Scotto, I'll take care of this." And to Con Martin, "We don't need no advice from greenhorns, mister. Keep your nose out of it."

Con Martin said, "I was just wondering."

"I want the logs out," the Walker said shortly. "But I don't want men killed doing it Scotto, get on over an' show me where you were. If you could see this man was in the bight of the line an' didn't whistle stop, I'll fire you."

John Scotto's glance at Con Martin was charged with venomous hatred. He turned and lurched through the brush toward the end of his whistle line with the Walker coming grimly behind him and Fromm, Garberino and the fallers following. The choker setter who had been working with Russ Knight hitched up his pants and turned toward the railroad track.

"She's over for today," he said.

"The Walker say to knock off?" asked Martin.

"Don't make no difference if he did or didn't," the man said doggedly. "I worked on a good many woods jobs in my time, an' there's never a one that didn't close down when a man got it on the job."

CON MARTIN fell into step beside him. "This new hand didn't know much about logging, I take it?"

"Green as an April fern," the man said. "An' when Fromm said he didn't baby him, he wasn't lyin'. He told him enough to get him started, an' that was all."

"Must not have been much help."

"I coulda done better alone," the man said sourly. "I saved him from gettin' killed, don't know how many times. The blame fool stepped over lines. He walked on the downhill side o' logs. He set the chokers wrong side out. It was a chore just keepin', him alive the first day. I didn't hardly figure he could last two."

"Wasn't this Knight the one was talking in the bunkhouse about them yarding the logs in funny?" Con Martin asked casually.

The man looked at him queerly. "You mean about leavin' the two best carloads till the last, instead of takin' 'em the way we come to 'em?"

"Something like that," Con said.

"I wouldn't know about it," the man said. "Pete Fromm's the hook tender. He wants it done that way, an' that's good enough for me."

Con Martin said, "I was just wondering."

The crew was all aboard the boxcar provided for them by the time the

Walker and the others came up to the line. The logging locomotive tooted shrilly, and they began the trip down to camp. The railroad spur was a sharp grade, and the train backed down; crew car next to the engine, and the long line of log cars winding down ahead, the end cars almost always out of sight around the sharp turns of the right-of-way.

It was a silent crew, with none of the horseplay and rough jesting that usually enlivened the trip home. Something of the fear of death had come to even the least sensitive of the men. In Russ Knight's bloody finish they had read the grim warning that they might be next; that it could happen to anyone like that in the woods.

Only once was the bumping monotony of the trip broken. Where the mountain grades leveled out and began to level slant into camp, the train stopped abruptly. The brakeman riding the front of the train yelled something angry, and the locomotive noisily pulled the train back up the hill a few rods. Then they resumed their descent. Con Martin went over and sat down by the Walker.

"What was all that about?" he asked.

The Walker looked at him for a moment as if debating whether to answer. Then his heavy features relaxed and became, for a moment, almost genial.

"Wrong switch must've been open," he said. "An old spur runs off there, down to the river dump; hasn't been used for years. Kids sometimes open it, just to make the train stop an' back up."

The crew car was passing the spur as he spoke, and by craning his neck Con Martin could see the rusty rails of the old track, their top surfaces faintly luminous in the slanting sunlight. They wound off to the left and were swallowed up in alder brush and second growth.

"Far from here to the river?" he asked.

"Not so very," said the Walker. "But it's a long haul from that dump around to the mill. We save time by takin' the train on down to the bay."

Con Martin said, "I was just wondering."

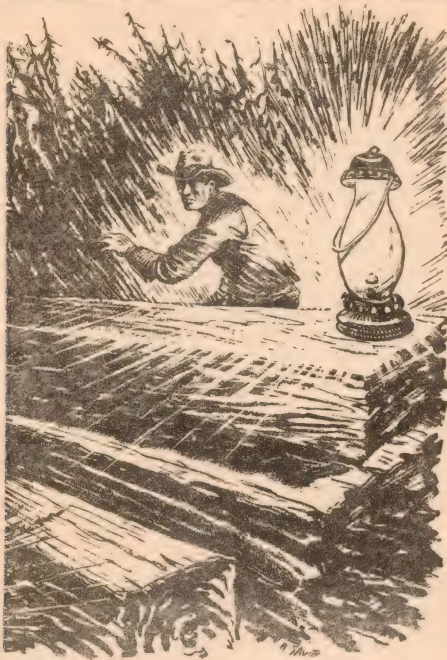


The two big men were fighting like animals, to the death.

THE crew's quietness persisted through the big evening meal. It was only in the bunkhouses afterward that a sort of lightness began to return to the conversation, and a man's voice occasionally would be raised in

a rusty scrap of song. Somebody started a card game, and Con Martin went out to smoke his pipe on the bunkhouse steps, enjoying the tangy wind from the wooded hills.

His body was pleasantly tired and



relaxed, but there was no peace in his mind. The problem Randall had thrown at him was solved—oh, there was a small matter of checking and proof, but it shouldn't be too difficult. But in the solving of it, he'd sent a man to die in the woods, and that was heavy in his

thoughts. So heavy it ached, in fact.

When can you pin a label on murder, Con Martin was thinking. Does it have to be a bullet or a knife thrust? Or can you call it murder when you stack a man against impossible odds—knowing he'll die, because the odds are all tremendously

and terribly in favor of his dying. That wasn't murder, according to law. But just the same, Martin thought, Russ Knight had been murdered as surely as if his killer had put a loaded gun to Russ's head and pulled the trigger.

A man came out of the bunkhouse and sat quietly on the steps beside him. It was Pete Fromm, the big hook tender. He sat in silence a moment before he spoke. It was gathering darkness now; the hills had gone from green to mauve, and were fading now to blackness.

"Too bad about Knight," said Fromm. "Was he a friend of yours?"

"Not especially," Con Martin said.

"Trouble with green hands, they're dangerous to have in the woods," Fromm said. "For themselves, an' for the men they work with."

Martin said, "I suppose that's so."

"You been loggin' long?"

"Off and on," said Con Martin.

Fromm puffed awhile in silence, and then knocked the bright sparks from his pipe. "Turnin' in?" he asked. "It's been a pretty tough day."

"I'll smoke another pipe," Martin said.

Fromm went back inside, and in a little while the bunkhouse lights went out. Con Martin sat quietly, waiting until there was no sound or movement from within. He got up then, and went over to the wash house. A kerosene lantern hung there for the use of anyone who needed a light at night in the camp. Martin did not light the lantern until he was well out of camp and up the railroad track to the woods. Then he set the lantern to burning, and walked with its swinging radiance making a tiny circle in the dark around him.

He arrived at the old spur in what seemed a surprisingly short time. The darkness was complete now; there was no point of light from the cloud-veiled sky. There was only the soft yellow glow of the lantern making a small world around him as he knelt to inspect the rails of the spur.

"For a track that hasn't been used in years," he muttered, "those rails are

pretty damn' bright."

They were upon him then, with a sudden scuff of booted feet. A heavy body struck his back and drove him face down into the rubble of the old roadbed. The sharp white light of an electric torch struck him in the face as rough hands turned him over. An impatient fist slammed at his chin, but it was a blow of contempt only, and had no intention of knocking him out.

"Cause me trouble, will yuh?" Scotto grunted.

Con Martin lashed up with a boot, and felt his caulks rip through cloth. The whistle punk gave a little yelp of pain and jumped back. Martin was gathering for a spring when Fromm's hard voice cut in.

"There's a gun here, snooper! Be good!"

THE blindness was leaving Martin now. He could see Fromm and Scotto in the yellow glow of the lantern. He could see the black gun Pete Fromm held in his fist. Con Martin sat still on the gravelly roadbed.

"I had it pegged right," he said. "You two were stealing the logs. You saved the best logs for the last two cars. Then just before you got to the old spur those cars were cut loose and left to roll down to the old dump. Nobody'd ever see it, because the road curves there so no one can see the end cars. You could raft the logs out and sell 'em after night. That's why there's been so much 'kid' trouble with that switch!"

Scotto said, "Smart, ain't he?"

"You must've had one of the brakeman helping you," Con Martin said. "We'll get him, too."

"You'll get a bullet," Fromm growled.

From the darkness behind them a heavy voice said, "I thought I'd learn somethin' if I followed you timber wolves up the track!"

Fromm spun to face the sound, and Con Martin made his leap then. He clawed at Fromm's wrist, and the black gun went spinning away into the blacker night. Then the whistle man came

in, and Con Martin felt tearing agony as the man's spikes raked down the flesh of his thigh. Con lashed out with his fist, and drove the vicious little cripple back. They circled warily.

Martin said desperately, "They killed Russ Knight, too, Walker. They sent a green hand into the woods and then threw everything in the book at him. Scotto knew that haulback would break—he could tell within ten feet where it would hit. But if that hadn't done it something else would, because Knight was getting onto their game, and they knew it. They knew they'd get him, and they did, without even laying a finger on him!"

The Walker's deep voice was terrible now. "It's the truth, Fromm, and you know it! But you forgot that the Walker's runnin' this camp! You've killed my men, and stolen my logs, and now by God you'll answer to me!"

Fromm squalled like a frightened cougar as the big form of the Walker came at him out of the night. Con Martin struck then, and caught Scotto by surprise. The whistle punk fell face downward on the rotting ties, and Martin turned to the others.

At the fringe of lantern light the two big men fenced like stallions, using as weapons their murderous steel-spiked feet. Great shadows of them danced like warlocks. There was no sound but their ragged breathing and the ringing scuff of steel on gravel. Then Pete Fromm screamed again and went down.

The Walker panted, "Don't try to stop it, Martin. An' if you never saw a man stomped to death, you better not look!"

Con Martin turned away. This was brutality incarnate, but he could think of Russ Knight and find justification, and a sort of peace.

Over the Volcano

IN the near future, an investigation will be undertaken which will have a two-fold purpose. It will serve the interests of geology and related sciences, and, at the same time, will furnish much-needed information in aeronautics.

Two and a half years ago, the Paricutin Volcano erupted in a cornfield in Mexico. This year, the volcano will be explored by the joint Mexican-U. S. volcano commission, by means of a U. S. Army Sikorsky helicopter. This will be the first time a helicopter is used in conjunction with another country for a scientific investigation.

By using the helicopter, scientists will be enabled to look right down into the erupting volcano, and see what is happening there in about half an hour, whereas such investigations done in the ordinary way would take many days. Dr. L. C. Graton of Harvard and Dr. Ezequiel Ordonez of Mexico are to be the geologists on this expedition. The electrical phenomena—discharges resem-

bling lightning, accompanied by thunder—are to be studied by Dr. O. H. Gish of the Carnegie Institution of Washington. Igor Sikorsky, who designed the helicopter, will also be along.

AS the high-altitude conditions, turbulence, and temperature that will be met with on this investigation are similar to those in the Pacific area where the war was fought, and as such conditions cannot be found anywhere in the United States, the United States Army is taking advantage of this exploration to do a little investigating for its own purposes.

Army officers will be piloting the R6A helicopter on the scientific flights, will be observing its performance under the various atmospheric conditions they will encounter. The results of their observations will determine the extent to which the helicopter can be used for purposes of rescue, observation, supply and liaison in any future war.

AMATEUR OUTLAW

MOOON-AND-A-HALF. Just a big round O with a quarter-circle under it." The voice carried a peculiar note, like a brittle chuckle, running through the words. "Them lost Injun Hills are a plumb puzzle. Nobody can keep a tally on cattle in there between roundups—not even Mooncalf McDammit himself. Oldtimers made it a standing joke how Mooncalf come to settle there. Couldn't find his way out the first five years, and by then he had a nice brand started out of cattle that drifted in and couldn't find *their* way out. So it's a cinch fer us to—"

A chair squeaked, and someone slammed the door on its few inches of crack. Across the hall Steve Quade hooked a toe to draw his own door wider. Not a confirmed eavesdropper, Steve; but certainly no cowhand—even a stranger drifting through—could be

expected to close his ears on such a conversation.

Further talk became only a droning mumble behind the other door, though, and Steve's dignity balked at leaving his seat on the bed to plaster an ear against the keyhole. He was almost undressed when deep tones boomed through again.

"Me, I no like. Someway, I just ain't forgot how them prison walls bear down on you inside—and monkeyin' with other people's cattle is the way I got behind 'em before. So you c'n count me out and I'll be driftin' on—"

The doorknob rattled, and Steve's toe eased his own door almost shut. A mo-



By MARK
LISH



*With his rope on Lang,
Steve chased the outlaws
toward McDammit's.*

It came plumb as a surprise to peaceable Steve Quade to find himself branded a cow thief, a killer and all-around skunkaroo. But here it was happening, and without anybody much to side him—a fact that was bound to be just as disagreeable to him as it might be to the enemy, who hadn't really so far tested his special kind of temper!

ment later some one left the opposite room and went bootheeling down the hall. A heavy man, long-striding.

"Well. Sounds like one Mooncalf McDammit is about to lose some cattle," Steve was thinking as he slid into bed. "Wonder if there really is a gent with a name like that? If it wasn't for wanting to see mom and dad so bad, and Sis, expect I'd stick around this Tylerville and see..."

HE pulled up the covers and was instantly drowsy. Sleep betrayed him, too; for he had planned vaguely on glimpsing, next morning, the occupant or occupants of that room across the narrow hall. But the sun's upper edge reddened the horizon when he awoke, and the door opposite his own swung wide to reveal bed covers drawn more or less neatly into place.

"Maybe they 'no like', and 've

drifted on," he speculated briefly, and dismissed the affair. By tonight he should be fifty miles nearer the home he had not visited since five years ago when he had whipped his father's foreman and teen tongue-lashed by Dad Quade.

But his mount was lame; during the night another horse had broke its tether, wandered to Darky's stall and kicked him just below the hock. On such small matters is based our good luck and our bad—the accident of a weakened halter rope setting a man's course willynilly toward gallows or godhead.

"Could trade him for another mount, I guess," Steve mused straightening from his examination of the swollen leg. "Won't be laid up but four-five days, though—and Darky's worth two of any mount I'd likely get for him.

"Got any woolfat, flunky?"

That "flunky" gained for Steve the stableman's lifelong disapproval; another sample of the power in small affairs.

"Name's Diddel," he grumbled. But he went for a can of woolfat and helped to doctor Darky, curbing his resentment in awareness that he should have kept a stronger tie on an animal known to be troublesome. Darky's leg was painful; he kicked nervously at the pressure of finger and flung Steve against the rough planks, filling his hand with splinters. Steve borrowed the stableman's knife and dug them out, swearing caustically at the knife's dullness.

"This horse is to stay right in this stall, watered in a bucket, with plenty of feed in front of him," he proclaimed unpleasantly as he turned to leave. "He's not to get kicked again, either—unless you want the slack taken out of those pants. Which'll be your pay: not getting said slack taken out."

Angry china blue eyes raised to meet arrogant dark ones, and Diddel's remonstrance died. He hitched his belt four inches higher and grumbled his way to the hayloft, and here the grip of circumstance shifted momentarily from Steve to Diddel. For Diddel was to see, in the nook formed by shed and stable and

haystack and visible only from above—only from the hayloft window—that which was to bring him death. Though at the moment he thought nothing of the casual meeting between a stranger and another man well known.

TIME TO KILL, saloons only for the killing. The first Steve visited contained a friendly bartender, an atmosphere of gloom possible only to an empty saloon in the morning, and an ancient derelict just finishing with his job of swamping out. Steve had a drink on the house, invited the old swamper to join in a second, and settled down to idle gossip with the bartender.

"You got an outfit around here called the Moon-and-a-Half?" he inquired presently. The bartender grinned widely.

"Sure have," he declared, as one proclaiming the presence locally of the Mother Lode.

"And a man named McDammit—Mooncalf McDammit—running same?" Steve pursued.

"Yep." The bartender might have been a realtor, eulogizing one of Tylerville's outstanding advantages. "The one and only Moon-and-a-Half, and the one and only Mooncalf McDammit. Raised them Lost Injun Hills yonder from a pup. Mooncalf did—there's oldtimers that claim it was him helped the Lost Injun find his way home."

"My lord," marveled Steve. "You mean to tell me some fair lady once married a McDammit, with the whole slate to pick from—and then piled Mooncalf onto Junior?"

The bartender's grin rubbed his earlobes. "Nope. Born McDermott, I'm told—me being here only ten years or so, I never heard it used. He got the nickname 'way back, when one Dan Reilly heard him beller 'That there is a moon calf, Dammit!' " six times in one day's calf-branding.

"This Reilly bought some horses from him shortly after, and made out the check to Mooncalf McDammit. Mooncalf had to endorse her thataway to get his money,

and Mooncalf McDammit he's been ever since."

"Mister Reilly must have brightened up the bunkhouse, of a long Winter evening," Steve murmured, and turned his head at the swish of batwing doors.

Three men entered, blinking early sunlight out of their eyes, and ranged along the bar beyond Steve Quade. As they passed Steve, each eyed him closely, and the nearest continued the scrutiny over his drink. A hard surly stare that ignored the attempted friendliness of Steve and the bartender.

Steve had not carried the nickname "Scrapper" from his boyhood home through five years of wandering by turning the other cheek. He leaned presently away from the bar, let his own eyes travel insultingly down the other's lank frame, up it again to sneer into hard eyes. The man sneered back and turned to his companions, and Steve heard him mutter: "Him, all right."

The tone was spark enough for a Quade temper; Steve clamped muscular fingers on a knobby shoulder, spun the lanky man so sharply as almost to make him fall.

"You bet I'm 'him'," he snapped. "What's it to you?"

An instant later he knew that he had merely played these men's game. The lanky man came out of his stagger with both fists flying; his companions joined the fray with a readiness and fury that pointed to one thing only.

"They had this battle cocked and primed for some reason," Steve thought in the back of his mind. "I just pulled the trigger for 'em."

Steve had the strength and speed and timeliness of your natural fighting man, and two he had sometimes handled. But three made one too many; they were all over him and around him and behind him, and while he knocked one staggering another struck from either side. Then he was down, and bootheels crunched along his body. One found his head, and for a moment the room and its noises grew vague and indistinct, a burble of voices mixed with the scuff of vicious feet.



HE SAT UP in the middle of strange silence, to see that his playmates had withdrawn from him and stood posed with hands held carefully, head high. Beyond them the ancient swamper brandished his mop like a banner, and the lank man's face dripped what looked like dirty water. Near the batwing doors a great solid figure stood limned against the stronger light from outside, arms, akimbo, the picture of an interested, but casual, bystander.

Steve got to his feet, stepping aside as his eye caught the twin bores of a sawed off shotgun trained across the bar. The bartender still wore his grin, slightly crooked now, but the shotgun did not grin at all.

"Seems we got a referee," Steve threw at his ex-playmates, and turned to the bartender. "All right with you, I accommodate 'em one or two at a time?"

It was the man near the door who answered, his voice jovial

"Take your pick and have at 'er. You get licked *that* way, though, it's just your hard luck. No more interference."

Steve grunted contemptuously, gestured at the lesser pair of three. "You'll do for dessert, Lanky."

The first round was too short to be interesting. These were bullies and not real fighting men; a sock on the nose hurt them as badly in the heat of battle as would the same sock in repose. They quit half-licked, leaving Steve un-scarred and only slightly winded.

The lanky man, though, was of different mettle.

He came in this time warily, without the reckless abandon of his first onslaught with odds behind him, but none the less viciously determined. His first licking fist caught Steve's nose and sent blood flying, his second found Steve still on balance and dumped him on the floor. Lanky was there with ready bootheels, but Steve rolled and came to his feet and bored in savagely. This time the lanky man went down, to flinch away from expected bootheels, find none forthcoming and take his time getting on his feet.

Steve was at him then instantly with a rapid fire of knuckles; the lanky man dodged and squirmed and kept moving too fast for the landing of solid blows. Then he was suddenly tumbling backward under Steve's driving attack and Steve was trying to stop, to avoid falling with him; but the lanky man had gripped a wrist and his bootheels found Steve's groin, doubled knees straightened sharply and powerfully, and Steve's head exploded against the floor two yards beyond the lanky man.

GLASS of whiskey has got cold water beat a mile, long's you don't get it in their eyes," a voice was saying. Steve sat up with the pungency of strong liquor in his nostrils and stinging the cuts and scrapes of his skin. A strong hand gripped his and he got to his feet, shaking a head that seemed an arm's length distant.

"Licked you fair and square, barroom style," the voice said, and Steve made his eyes focus on the man who had stood near the door. "That somersault trick's a good'n, when it works at all. Held your wrist just long enough to snap your head agin the floor, too. We made him call it good with you laid out, though, and take his bootheels out of here. Noticed you didn't do no stompin' when *he* was down."

"Thanks," Steve muttered, his voice dry with the thought that "we" meant mostly the bartender and his shotgun. "Wonder if he's left town?"

The big man chuckled. "Kind of cocky about your handfighting, eh? Well, we better have a drink, about next. You and the rawboned gent is both young yet; lots of time to get together again."

"This one is on the house," the bartender stated firmly. "First, I'll make you acquainted. Mooncalf, this is—"

"Quade," Steve supplied. "Steve Quade."

"Meet McDammit, Steve. Mooncalf McDammit. Runs a couple of cows nearby, and a whizzer now and then."

Steve acknowledged with a mumble and a curt handshake, resenting this man's officiousness, contemptuous of his bombast. The word "kibitz" had not then been foaled, but its manifestations had been the same a thousand years and more. Steve was disappointed in McDammit.

"Guess I owe you a couple of much obliges," he told the bartender, pointedly ignoring McDammit. "You and your scat gun. I was about to get skinned up, that first set-to."

The bartender opened his mouth, but McDammit as usual beat him to it. "Worse than that, looked to me. Eh, Charley?"

"Plenty worse," Charley agreed soberly. "Hadh't been—"

He broke off to hail the grizzled swamper, at the backroom door with his bucket and mop. But the old man disappeared without turning his head.

"Dunno his name, but I guess it ain't 'Hey'," the bartender apologized. "Blew in this morning and took my offer to swamp out for a drink and a dollar, me

claiming a lame wrist. But he sure wrapped his mop around that long gent's ugly mug at the psychohoolical moment, just as same was fishin' the gun from under his pants. I was a mile too late with the sawed-off—"

Steve's eyes had widened in angry surprise. "The fella meant to *shoot* me, huh?" he blurted. "Kind of unnecessary, seems like, with me down and three of 'em waddancing on my shape."

"Looks almost as if they didn't like you," McDammit probed. "Must think you been talkin' behind their backs or something."

"Never saw any of 'em before," Steve declared. "Must be the long gent is just 'kill-crazy. . . . No, he made a crack to the others: 'Him, all right.' So they must have come in here looking special for me. But darned if I can imagine why."

He spoke innocently, sincerely, and continued to do so under friendly probing from the bartender and McDammit; the latter presently dismissed the matter with a jovial: "The gents just made a mistake, I reckon," and launched into a long-windy about another case of mistaken identity. There was cattle-stealing in the story, and Steve suddenly remembered the conversation of last night; but the very drone of McDammit's tale decided him against mentioning it.

"I go to proclaiming a deep and dark dime-novel plot, with this windy chicken-farmer in the middle, I only get hoo-rawed," he reflected contemptuously. "Besides I don't like his big mouth anyway—be jake with me if somebody steals both them cows the bartender mentioned."

He left the saloon with one interest only in Tylerville: the chance that he might meet once more the lanky scrapper. But interests shift easily in a young man's world, and when Steve's stroll ended at the livery stable the lanky man was pushed into background.

WITH the saloon once more empty the old man reappeared. Charley handed him a dollar. "Why'n't you come back, while ago?" he inquired curiously.

The old man muttered something,

started to turn away; thought better of it and queried: "That was Mooncalf McDammit in here, eh? Heard you say he 'runs a couple of cows.'"

"Them drouths a few year back didn't bust him, did they?"

"That was just a figure of speech, kinda," the bartender grinned. "Drouths busted some of the cowmen around here, all right, but the Moon-and-a-Half appeared to thrive on 'em. Branded an even two thousand calves last roundup, with Mooncalf right on hand to see the boys didn't stop at nineteen-ninety-nine."

"Hmm." The other grinned, warming a little under Charley's friendly way; Charley thought too, vaguely, that he sensed relief in the grin, and that it had something to do with McDammit not having "gone bust." The old man moved toward the door, and Charley hastily set out bottle and glasses.

"One on the house?" he suggested. ". . . Used to be around here, eh?—seemed to know McDammit."

"Yes." The grizzled head lifted under its battered hat, and for an instant Charley glimpsed the man that had been. "No use bein' bashful, I reckon—somebody'll reckonize me in a day or two anyway. Didn't want Mooncalf to be the first, though. Dan Reilly is the name. I . . . been away."

CHAPTER II

"Through a hangrope, mebbly."

A BARGAIN at a hundred dollars. this team," Diddel was saying. "Wagon and harness worth easy another hundred. But I can shave it to one-fifty, if you got cash."

"You" was a slender figure about the shape of an angel in spite of travel-wrinkled clothing, turning troubled eyes at Steve's appearance and back to Diddel.

"I've got it," she admitted. "But that won't leave much for—for—"

Steve ran his glance over the nondescript assortment Diddel had to offer. Ratty range bronchos, half-broken and treacherous if his horseman's eye could

judge; a decrepit wagon with in-and-out wheels, probably discarded by some rancher and rescued by Diddel; a much be-patched and twined and haywired harness worth, in Steve's considered opinion, two dollars less than a damn.

The girl fidgeted uncertainly. Diddel, in a burst of magnanimity—or concern lest she might leave—blurted: "Oh, well. I don't need this wagon much anyway. I'll make it an even one-twenty-five. But that's my last and best."

"It's a bargain, ma'am," Steve assured clearly, stepping closer. "You couldn't do better buying from your brother. Why, I wouldn't hesitate—much—at giving a flat two dollars for that outfit. And at one-twenty-five—well, I'd like to buy it if you don't."

The girl gasped, the gasp merging quickly into clear laughter. Diddel shot Steve a glance that left the smell of brimstone in the air. The girl turned to Steve, taking in his cowhand garb and air of competency.

"You—I—" she began, and went on in a rush: "How much, really, is it worth—what should I offer?"

"Sixty bucks, and hang right there," Steve counseled, and added a thick slice of horse-trader's bluff: "If he don't take it, I happen to know a rancher that's got a good team for sale."

"Who?" Diddel cut in maliciously, and Steve named hastily the only local rancher of whose existence he was sure: "McDammit; Mooncalf McDammit. Friend of mine. He's here in town right now, Miss—"

But the girl's eyes had widened and lost their warmth. She took a step backward, examining Steve as if seeing for the first time something she had rather not have seen at all. Her nose wrinkled, and Steve was conscious of the reek of liquor on his breath and from his shirtfront where McDammit had splashed it, and under her gaze his bruised face ached disreputably.

"You drunken beast," she said quietly, and turned to Diddel "If you'll take an even hundred—"

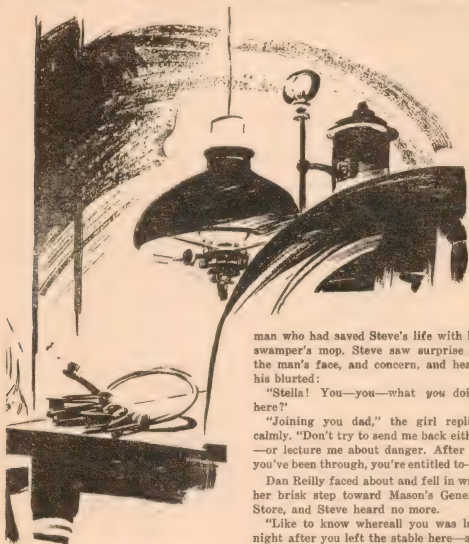
Diddel could, and hastily did, with a



After Steve hit him, the deputy collapsed against the cell door, held off the floor by Steve's grip.

forty-dollar sneer in Steve's direction. Steve sneered back twenty-five dollars worth, his mind busy over the sudden change in girl-climate. From the girl friendly he might have ridden casually away; the girl angry was a challenge he could not dismiss.

"Please make the bill of sale to Stella Reilly," she told Diddel. "And if you'll harness the team and tie them up, I'll be back in half an hour to get them."



DURING the girl's examination of Steve a rangy middle-aged man with straggly mustaches and cool grey "gunfighter" eyes had approached to stand by idly. He accosted Steve now, brushing aside his vest to reveal the small star pinned to a sweat-stained suspender.

"Supposed to be sheriff around here," he stated mildly. "Cross is the name. Like to talk with you a minute—question or two."

"Fire away," Steve invited absently, his gaze following the girl whose course met, half a block away, that of the old

man who had saved Steve's life with his swamper's mop. Steve saw surprise on the man's face, and concern, and heard his blurted:

"Stella! You—you—what you doing here?"

"Joining you dad," the girl replied calmly. "Don't try to send me back either—or lecture me about danger. After all you've been through, you're entitled to—"

Dan Reilly faced about and fell in with her brisk step toward Mason's General Store, and Steve heard no more.

"Like to know whereall you was last night after you left the stable here—say midnight or thereabouts," the sheriff was saying, his manner almost apologetic but his grey eyes quietly alert.

"Asleep in the hotel," Steve replied promptly. "Must have been around ten-thirty when I rented that room—I went straight to the feathers."

"Umm. That jibes with what the hotel clerk says. But—sure you didn't leave the room after you went upstairs? By the backstairs, maybe?"

"Didn't even know there *was* a back stairs," Steve returned.

"Um." The sheriff opened his large hand, to let a slender horsehair hatband

spring back to shape and dangle from his fingers. "This yours?"

Steve hesitated, wondering what this was all about. But Diddel answered for him. "Sure is, mister. I noticed that on your hat this—uh—last night. Noticed it was loose, too."

"It's mine all right," Steve snapped. "Hadh't even missed it until right now. What about it?"

"Found it alongside a dead man, in the alley back of the hotel," the sheriff stated bluntly. "Found this button, too—and see your shirt is shy a couple just like it. 'Guess you're under arrest, mister."

For a wild moment temper boiled in Steve Quade. With luck, he might slug this drowy man and get his fingers first to the weapon on the other's hip . . .

But the sheriff read his man correctly. "I'm closer to this gun than you are," he reminded dryly. "Noticed yours still rolled in the slicker on your saddle. Which might be in your favor: a man *meditatin'* harm to somebody is apt to lug his weapon along. 'Comin', peaceable?" Steve nodded, relaxing under the other's quiet, almost friendly attitude. Had he known for how many successful arrests this sheriff's bedside manner had been responsible, his reaction might have been different.

"There is one more point we might as well look into," the sheriff went on casually. "You mind letting me see your hands?"

STEVE grinned and held them forward, turning them over slowly. The sheriff gravely examined his palms, careful to keep the weapon on his hip turned the other way.

"You've dug out a couple of splinters, looks like," he said gently. "How'd you get 'em?"

Steve told him, jerked a thumb at Diddel. "He saw it happen—loaned me his dang dull knife to dig 'em out."

Diddel's china-blue eyes glinted maliciously. "I don't know nothing about no splinters, sheriff," he stated deliberately. "He's talkin' through his hat."

Steve's fists jerked his forearms level,

but Diddel had taken a couple of steps as he spoke, standing now behind his hundred-dollar wagon.

"He'd lie when the truth 'ud do better, just to contrary me," Steve snapped. "What difference the splinters make anyway, sheriff?"

"A lot, maybe." The sheriff's right hand lingered near his gunhandle. "Killin' was done with a club, 'case you don't know. Blood on the handle end, where splinters had broke off in somebody's hand."

Diddel grinned tauntingly, hitching the slack from his trousers.

"I'll be seeing you," Steve promised, and fell into step with the sheriff.

"You won't be seein' nobody," Diddel retorted across the safety of distance. "Unless through a hang-rope, mebby."

"You have got one hell of a temper, Quade, I notice," the sheriff observed gently as they left the stable. "Mind walkin' on the left side of me? Noticed you look at this gun wistful, while ago."

Steve grinned and changed places. He liked this man. "Guess I'll keep on the good side of you, if I can."

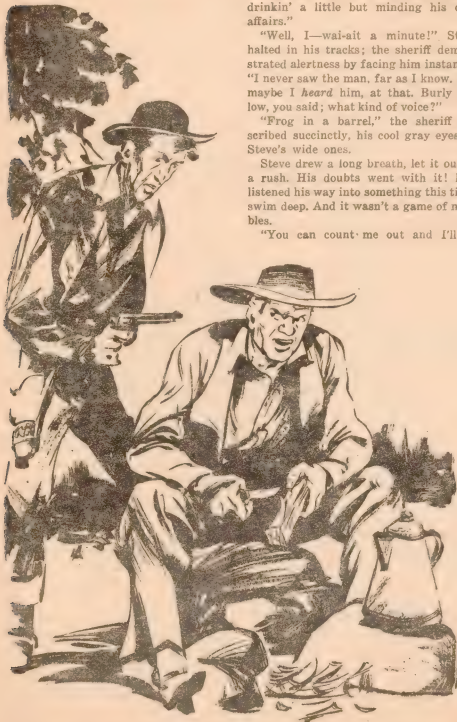
"No good side to a lawman, from the standpoint of any gent who's been up to something," the sheriff philosophized. "And it looks like you come in that category. Like to hear your story of it, though."

"No story, sheriff," Steve told him soberly. "I'm just the sucker who wasn't even there. I don't know how my hatband got alongside of any dead man, you'll find buttons like these on every third shirt you meet, and Diddel lied about the splinters for plain spite."

"Diddel is a spiteful cuss," the sheriff admitted. "Made one little slip, too, talkin' about the hatband. But there's a man layin' dead in Morton's Parlors, and he didn't die of heart disease. Looks bad for you, I'd say. Unless you can maybe make out self-defense; juries around here go pretty light on cases of that kind."

"Self-defense be damned," Steve flared. "I never even *saw* the gent, I tell you! What's he like, anyway?"

"Big, burly fellow. Name of Bill Dollar.



Been around town three-four days, drinkin' a little but minding his own affairs."

"Well, I—wai-ait a minute!" Steve halted in his tracks; the sheriff demonstrated alertness by facing him instantly. "I never saw the man, far as I know. But maybe I *heard* him, at that. Burly fellow, you said; what kind of voice?"

"Frog in a barrel," the sheriff described succinctly, his cool gray eyes on Steve's wide ones.

Steve drew a long breath, let it out in a rush. His doubts went with it! he'd listened his way into something this time, swim deep. And it wasn't a game of marbles.

"You can count me out and I'll be

"Git them hands high, you!" a gloating voice snarled at Steve.

driftin' on," bass tones had boomed last night. And somebody had followed Bill Dollar and had killed him, because he knew too much. Steve Quade also had known too much—or had been suspected—and except for a dirty wet mop in a prompt man's hands . . .

"Guess I under-estimated McDammit—and some others," Steve said quietly. "And I guess I have got a story after all, sheriff—"

"Pretty fair, son, offhand like that," the sheriff praised dryly when Steve had finished. "Now if somebody will just steal a few moon' cows between this and your trial, you'll be all set. But nobody that knows Mooncalf real well is apt to try it."

CHAPTER III

Jailbird

SIX CAUTIOUS MEN of the coroner's jury held that Bill Dollar had met his death at the hands of a person or persons unknown, but recommended that Steve Quade be detained. Dan Reilly came forward to declare he had seen Steve's hatband on the floor during the saloon fight, but had not noticed it afterward. A point in Steve's favor, Jim Cross agreed, since Bill Dollar's body had not been found until a half hour after that fight had ended. To Steve, it was plain the lanky man or his friends had picked up the hatband and "planted" it.

"Charley didn't see it, though—maybe on account of the high bar," Sheriff Cross pointed out impersonally. "Mooncalf neither—'course he was farther away and the light bad. And Dan—well, Dan Reilly was a prominent citizen around here twenty years ago. But since then he's . . . been away. Prosecutor Kerney would tear Dan's testimony up some.

"I would like to hear again, though, that conversation you overheard. Word for word, if you can manage it. . ."

Seven days of perfect security, with physical comfort beyond a cowboy's ordinary choice. Sheriff Jim Cross was no chiseler, and the liberal county allowance for boarding prisoners went to that

purpose only; Deputy Zeb Galely maintaining whimsically that if the great fraternity of Riders of the Rods ever discovered Tylerville, the county would be running a Winter resort in its jail.

But to Steve Quade the confinement was a sort of progressive hell, his misery doubling day by day. Each day he tried composing a letter to Dad Quade, explaining this new delay in his arrival home; each day he ended by wadding the paper Zeb Galely gave him and throwing it hard on the floor.

"Won't be home on account of being held for trial on a murder charge," he quoted bitterly. "Fine excuse, huh?"

"You ort to take her easy, son," Deputy Zeb counseled. "It's wearin' on the bootheels, traipsin' back and forth like that."

"What I 'ort to do," Steve retorted, only half in earnest, "is bat you over the head and get out of here; go run down that lanky buzzard and hammer some talk out of him. He knows plenty about this—and it's damn funny he can't be found."

"Jim Cross is doin' all *you* could, along that line," Zeb declared. "Other lines, too. If you done her, son, you're outa luck; Jim Cross will prove her on you. But if you didn't, he'll he'll prove that too. Jim plays her thorough; if he tells Kerney you're ready fer trial, it'll be after he's tried out every defense you might use, and made sure it won't work. And he'll be plumb sure in his own mind you're guilty."

IT WAS late that afternoon when Steve saw Stella Reilly from his cell window. Driving the ratty bronchos that seemed bent on jerking apart the rickety wagon they pulled; handling the lines with more determination than expertness. As they passed the jail a newspaper whipped from the ground in a little flurry of wind, and the team reared and lunged. White faced but tight-lipped, the girl sawed at the reins and brought them under control again. They passed from Steve's view with both horses still cavorting nervously, groceries bouncing in the wagon bed

as the wobbly wheels were jerked against roughnesses of the road.

"Nervy gal," thought Steve, and pressed his face hard against the window bars to watch as long as he could. A real girl—a girl a man could . . .

He jerked himself up short, his mind a swirl of bitterness. Jailbird, ogling Stella Reilly through the bars that held him—that would hold him until a jury, faced with evidence that could not be denied, sent him behind still stronger bars to spend his life. Or consigned him to the shorter, less irksome agony of clutching hemp. When he turned from the window, Steve's drab cell had become a torture chamber.

"Smart gal, too," he reflected, bitter with self scorn. "Sized me up for a no-good boozy bum, second time she looked me over. And here I am, proving it in this damned cell—waiting for Jim Cross to pin the deadwood on me. Hoping *he'll* clear me. A lawman, that keeps his standing good by glomming somebody to pay for every wrong thing done . . ."

He stepped to the cell door, stood there practicing certain maneuvers. The bars were a good five inches apart; plenty of room for an accurately directed fist of Scrapper Quade. Satisfied, he sat on the iron cot and tore a blanket into strips, twisting them to lengths of clumsy rope. These he arranged at the cot's foot, concealed by the upper blanket.

IT WAS Zeb Galey's habit to drop in near bedtime, for a chat and "to look things over." Simple enough for Steve to roll a cigarette, search his pockets and find no matches. Deputy Zeb extended a dozen; Steve's quick hand swooped past them and gripped a skinny wrist and yanked, and his other fist flashed between the bars. Deputy Zeb collapsed against the cell door, held off the floor only by Steve's grip. Steve reached to pluck the .45 from its holster, reached again to go through the other's pockets, and straightened to swear in disappointment.

Through the open door he could see the keys Deputy Zeb usually carried, lying

on the battered office desk. In plain sight twelve feet away—four yards that might as well have been four miles.

Deputy Zeb groaned a little, struggled vaguely against Steve's grip on his wrist, opened blue eyes to harden as realization came.

"Socked me, huh? Zowie—*what* a sock! But where's it going to get you?" His eyes went to the keys on the desk, returned to meet Steve's coolly.

Steve made a long arm to reach the cot, brought away the blanket strips and with his free hand looped one around the other's throat. One strip he used to bind the deputy's hands behind his back, two others he tied to lengthen the one around Zeb's neck, and jerked the noose snug.

"Meant to use this just to tie you while I made some nice tracks," he told the deputy, "but it'll do for a snubbin' rope now. Look, Zeb: you walk backwards to that desk, pick up those keys and fetch 'em here. You try jumping behind the door, or any such skulduggery, I jerk you off balance and if necessary—shoot."

Deputy Zeb got to his feet, awkwardly because of his bound arms. But he made no move toward the office door.

Temper flared along Steve's arm to tighten his trigger finger, and his dark eyes flamed threat. But Galey's blue ones answered steadily, though in them stood the certainty that Steve was going to shoot. Had those blue eyes sneered a doubt of Steve's intention, Zeb Galey might have died; as it was their unflinching certainty did something to the other's inner being. For a full minute they stood thus, Steve's trigger hand in mutiny though anger twitched its muscles.

His eyes gave it up first. Zeb Galey, watching their brown depths in a kind of fascination, let out a gusty breath.

"Guess you're whiter inside than either of us figured, Quade," he said steadily.

"You mean I just ain't got the guts," Steve retorted bitterly, and lowered his weapon.

"Nope. T'other way round, I reckon." Deputy Zeb's eyes were as certain now of safety as a moment ago they had been sure of sudden death. "Your mistake was

tyin' me up, so's I couldn't make any fool moves. For which, I'm obliged to you."

"Needn't be," Steve told him. "I sure tried to shoot. But I got a better idea, now."

SWIFTLY he fastened Zeb to the cell bars at one side of the door, reached through and pulled off Zeb's left boot.

"So far you haven't yelled," he commented. "You going to keep on that way, or do I gag you?"

"Nobody'd likely hear me anyway," Zeb returned philosophically. "Guess I can meet you that near halfway, even with a county check in my pocket. 'Sides, Jim Cross'll be here any minute now."

"Which will be bad for one of us," Steve declared grimly, his fingers busy with strips of blanket. With Zeb's high old-fashioned boot at the end of a blanket rope, he began casting. His third try raked the keys from desk to floor; each new effort teased them a few inches closer, Zeb Galey watching interestedly and making occasional dry comment. Then the boot top slid under the keys and scooped them in, and Steve jerked the boot to his hand with a triumphant little grunt.

"Well, you got 'em," Zeb Galey sighed. "Now if you're guilty, use 'em and ride. Ride a long ways, with your head cocked always over one shoulder, avoidin' towns and dances and girls and any other kind o' fun. You'll only be delayin' matters, because—"

But Steve tossed him a kiss and was gone. Zeb tried the knots, found they had been tied by a cowboy, and settled to resigned waiting. Yelling might bring somebody, but—well, it was bad enough for Jim Cross to find him thus. The sheriff's common sense and self-control had never been better demonstrated than by his refusal to grin when he arrived a half hour later.

Swiftly he cut away the blanket strips, and somehow kept the chuckle out of his voice as he inquired: "How'd he manage it, Zeb?"

"After this I'll toss 'em matches—if any," Zeb gave full explanation, snappish-

ly, through lips no redder than his cheeks. "Well dang it, let's get goin'. He's like as not stopped to lick Diddel instead of pilin' up tracks. Might ketch him 'fore he gets out of town."

"No hurry, Zeb," Jim Cross returned thoughtfully. "We run onto him in the dark, he might go to shootin' and make things worse. Although, wish I could get him word—"

"Get him word? What you drivin' at, anyway?"

"I was comin' to turn him loose," the sheriff explained. "Took Diddel to Kerney's office, while ago, and between us we talked reel firmly to him. Admitted he lied about them splinters, and that the hatband was on Quade's hat when he was doctorin' the horse that morning. On top of that—well, look at what I just left on the desk."

Half a steerhide freshly skinned, with bare patches where someone had clipped the hair from brands. Zeb Galey picked it up, turned it this way and that, held it against the light; referred once to a list of brands from distant counties in a desk drawer and examined the hide again.

"I," he breathed softly, "will be damned. Who'd ever have thunk it?"

"Not many, I reckon," the sheriff agreed. "But it sure takes the leisure out of our job the next few days. We got to do a little cowboyin' first—get us a hide or two of our own gatherin'—and then stir up the hornets' nest before Quade gets around to it and gets himself killed."

"In a few minutes we'll dash out hollerin' 'Ketch 'im!' and let on we're plumb desperate to get hold of Quade again and hang him. That'll work two ways: give us an excuse to ride the hills, and give Quade a break if he runs into something 'fore we can get our powders mixed."

CHAPTER IV

Amateur Outlaw

THE livery stable was dark and silent. Knuckles itching, Steve lit a match to examine the cubbyhole office with its frowsy bed, rattled a harness in case Diddel were elsewhere about the

premises. No dice. Diddel, had Steve but known, was in a saloon uptown, drowning recent humiliation at the hands and tongues of Sheriff Jim Cross and Prosecutor Kerney. Freedom was getting badly shot in this district, mourned Diddel, when a man couldn't even work out a strictly personal grudge without a couple of law-dogs insulting him.

Surprisingly, Darry's leg had been well cared-for and he showed no lameness as Steve led him from stall to saddle. "Diddel figured he'd get to sell him for the feed bill," Steve surmised ungratefully but accurately.

A dozen miles from town he made camp in rough wild country hard to negotiate by darkness; fringe of the Lost Injun Hills wherein must lie the solution to his problem.

But in the gray chill of breakfastless morning his errand seemed not so easy. How start, where head for, what do when he got there? Sheriff Jim Cross to keep clear of; every man he met a potential hazard to his freedom. He had not killed Bill Dollar—had not, ever, killed any man. But if he met one who recognized him, and who craved the glory of taking in an escaped murderer, shooting first and deadliest might prove his sole means to staying free. The which was dead against not only Steve's philosophy, but his past training.

"You are a scrapper, kid," long ago a grizzled cowboy, wearing the scars of his own education, had said to him. "But you are not cut out for a killer. You'd have regrets. So, with a temper the like of yours, better leave the guns alone and settle your have-tos by hand."

Which had fitted well into lusty young philosophy, since in Steve there was no instinct to deprive another of life, no real desire even to inflict injury; the appeal of combat lying for him in the matching of strength and endurance, the shock and jar of physical contact. Though owning guns most of his life, never was one carried at his hip; by the time a man got to roll-bed or slicker, he reasoned, hot anger should cool enough to let horse sense take over. If then the urge to shoot



The shotgun charge flung the chair back with a great buckshot hole through it.

was still persistent—well, perhaps a killing was in order. So far the weapons on the ends of muscular arms had served his need, but marksmanship had suffered; it is the man with bullets ready to hand whose reflexes sharpen at expense of chance-met coyotes and rabbits and darting chipmunks.

"Hell of a training for a bold bad owl-hooter," Steve reflected, casually rueful. "Or an owlhoot catcher either. That lanky gent could likely unload his gun into me while I hunted for the handle on this one. Must remember to worry about that, after I find 'im. Let's see, now..."

HIS ENEMIES were cattle thieves, bent on working the herds of Mooncalf McDammit. Some of them, then, would be located in this district; either

posing as innocent cowboys—Steve had humor enough, even on an empty stomach, to grin dryly at that “innocent cowboy”—or holing up secretly in this helter-skelter that was the Lost Injun Hills. Lanky and his precious mates were not locally known, even to Bartender Charley or Sheriff Jim Cross, yet obviously had been in close touch with the local situation. Ergo: these at least were hiding out nearby.

“No use *hunting* ’em, in this up-and-down jumble,” Steve decided. “But just meandering around, sniffing at the air and getting good and lost, maybe I run onto something.”

The “something” spoke from behind him and unexpectedly around midday.

“Howdy, Quade. Travelin’ or just goin’ someplace?”

The voice seemed to carry a chuckle through its tones, dry and with the hard brittle quality of a snake’s rattle. Steve reined Ducky around, keeping himself carefully straight and quiet in the saddle until he faced the sound.

“Easy,” the lanky man counseled then, and the gun at his hip somehow slid gently upward into his right hand. “You cut loose that temper, it’ll be your last mad spell. . . . That’s better. Heard how you broke jail, and how Jim Cross is a-ravin’ around. Maybe we ought to get acquainted, like. Huh? Man in your fix needs to hook up someplace.”

“We’re acquainted enough,” snapped Steve, “to start in right where we left off, now and here. Your pals too, if they’re handy by. You game?”

The lanky man hesitated as if considering temptation, gave his head a little regretful shake.

“Nuh-uh. Be fun, kinda, takin’ the conceit outa you again. But business comes first and my boss figgers we can use you better all in one piece. We’re a little short-handed, seein’ I ran them ‘pals’ of mine ragged, right after they let you lick ’em both in that saloon.”

Steve struggled with anger, trying to be the cool and calculating shrewd detective.

“Your boss, eh? Doc Middleton, or Curly Bill?”

“Them pikers! You hook up with us, you’re hookin’ up with reel go-getters,” the lanky man chuckled. He glanced toward the sun and piled temptation high; “Stub’s camp is close—we’ll drop by and cook us up a bait of yearlin’ steak. Moon steak—it’s scrumptious. eh? . . . C’mon, then.”

He caressed his loosely held weapon into its holster, belted now boldly outside his trousers, and reined his horse around.

“CAMP” was a tough-hand’s rollbed shoved under overhanging brush to be invisible at a few feet, ashes in the midst of clustered boulders, a dollar’s worth of cooking utensils. By the ashes were freshly whittled bone-dry shavings, and on a rock a steak to fill the twelve-inch frying pan.

“Stub was about to eat, I see,” the lanky man commented, and whistled twice in poor imitation of a quail. “Dang it, never can learn to do that right. But he’ll savy to come out of the brush. Keerful about strangers, Stub is—too many of his pictures out.”

No one appeared, and a moment later came the same call, a single perfect imitation of Bob White. The lanky man stiffened, shot a glance at Steve.

“Somebody follerin’ us,” he said, and slid between tall boulders. “If he comes or in, you keep him talkin’—me and Stub will do whatever else is needed. Unless this is a doublecross—in which case you’d better get at your prayers.”

He disappeared, and Steve busied himself at whittling a few more shavings. He was conscious of stealthy approach through nearby brush by someone on foot, but kept his eyes on the knife-blade until a gloating voice snarled at him.

“Git them hands high, you,” it said. “Guess that dang Jim Cross and Kerney will sing a differ’nt tune when I come waltzin’ you back to their leaky jail.”

Diddei was bleary of eye and none too steady of hand, the .45 he held at aim all the more dangerous for shaky trig-

ger-finger. Steve let the knife drop and straightened arms, rising slowly.

"Turn yer back and undo that belt buckle," Diddel directed. "Let her slide to the ground, easy. Any sudden move, I'll be tickled to death to pull this trigger."

Steve obeyed, carefully, the whimsical thought in his mind that but for his other and worse enemies watching from the brush, this might be end-of-trail for an amateur outlaw. Diddel raked the gun-belt toward himself with a long stick.

"You kin turn around now," he gloated. "Been follerin' you ever since las' night when I heard you'd got away. Never said nothin' to nobody, jist buckled on my gun and took after you. Reckon *this* will show them two—"

He broke off, bleary gaze on the two saddled horses grazing among the bushes, whiskey-fogged brain getting around to the fact that something was wrong in the picture.

"Hey! Somebody rode in here with you. Where?"

"Right here, Diddel," the lanky man's voice chuckled from the clump of brush behind him. "You can drop the gun, now."

Diddel's eyes tried to roll all the way 'round in his head, and the gun slipped from nerveless fingers.

"Might of knowed you had yer gang around," he mouthed bitterly at Steve, and shrugged. "Oh well, there ain't no reward yet anyhow."

The lanky man stepped out of the brush, into Diddel's view. And Diddel, betrayed by the fuddled mess he was using for a brain, blurted: "Why, you—you're Lang. You're the one I seen from the hayloft window that morning, talking to—"

"Yeh, I'm the one," Lang cut in harshly. "So you seen us together that morning, huh?—and overheard us. And I reckon you've blabbed it all over town, by now."

Diddel's answer was so blankly simple it had the ring of truth.

"Blabbed what? All I heard was your name spoke—how'd I know it was anything to blab?"

"No I reckon not—then," Lang agreed, as if talking to himself. For a moment

he stood silent, regarding Diddel thoughtfully.

"You're an unlucky kind of a duck, stumblin' into things," he said then, decision in his eyes, though his chuckling voice might have been discussing the value of sugar in coffee.

DIDDEL sensed his intention, bent desperately toward the weapon at his feet. The lanky Lang let him lift it clear of the ground, fired twice in leisurely casual fashion. Diddel screamed and pitched face down, clawing at the gravelly dirt.

"Better git to a lookout, Stub," Lang said quietly, to the heavy-set fellow who had stepped from the boulders. "Make sure them shots don't bring some long-eared gent in on us."

Stub disappeared, and the lanky man turned to Steve.

"Don't look so flabbergasted," he counseled sardonically. "The gent could blab too much to be let go back to town. Even if he couldn't put the things he seen together for himself, Jim Cross would dang soon do it. . . . And don't forget it was *you* Diddel come after. Had you cold, too, wasn't fer me and Stub."

"At least he didn't shoot me down cold, though," Steve retorted, nausea churning inside him, eyes on Diddel whose fingers still twitched feebly. He had hated Diddel and despised him, and his knuckles had itched to feel the man's flesh giving under them; but cold-blooded murder made him now almost Diddel's partisan. He added bitterly; "And of course it's me they'll blame for his killing—I reckon you hadn't over-looked *that*?"

"Hadn't thought of it, but I expaiet it's true," Lang admitted, his voice more than ever giving Steve the illusion of a chuckling, talking snake. "Can't hang you no higher for two killin's than one, though. . . . I'll cut a couple more steaks while you light the fire. Stub can bury this Diddel thing after while—he's got a shovel hid out someplace."

He disappeared in thick brush, carrying the camp butcher knife. For minutes Steve stood looking after him,

fighting down the temper that replaced nausea. The lanky man was not his only objective now; there was "The Boss" to be considered. Someone well known in Tylerville and probably influential. He must know the whole setup before confronting Jim Cross again, or hear again that dry "Pretty fair, son, offhand like this. But—"

"Which means I got to hang and rattle with Lang," he reflected. "Fine kid notion I had back yonder—beating any confessions out of a buzzard like that."

Lang came with steaks and began frying them, hospitably sliding the first into a plate for Steve. Stub returned with a casual "Nobody in sight" to fill his own plate and seat himself on the one remaining smooth-topped boulder. Lang nodded briefly, finished frying his own steak and glanced around.

"I see you gents left the cushion fer me," he mocked, and Steve turned his eyes away as Diddel's shoulders flattened under the lanky man's weight.

"Seen Slim, while 'fore you rode in," Stub mumbled around a mouthful. "Said him and Daly found two carcasses with the brands skinned out. On Reilly Crick. Figgered it was done yestiday."

Lang stiffened on his seat, jarred for once from his cold-bloodedly casual manner.

"The hell!" he breathed. "They git word to—?"

He paused, with a sidelong glance at Steve.

"Yeah. Daly went to tell the boss, while Slim looked fer you. Figgered you'd be wanted."

"Yeah," Lang agreed. "Somebody is gettin' too smart fer their pants. The boss better have 'em arrested."

CHAPTER V

Lidda Snowy Lamb

THE MEAL over, Lang tossed his plate aside for Stub to suit himself about washing, and got to his feet. The sun was three-quarters down its westward slide.

"Me and you'll go see the boss," he

said, looking at Steve. "Too many tracks leadin' in here, Stub; you better move this camp a couple miles east soon as you bury Diddel. Then, come dark you slip in town and turn Diddel's horse right in his feed corral. Brush the sweat off good."

Steve, jogging by furtive route toward unknown destination, had much the feeling of a small boy given a glimpse at affairs of his elders and then rebuffed. Lang chatted amiably enough about casual matters, but shied away from real information with a curt: "Boss'll tell you. And when we get there is soon enough fer you to know him." Within the first mile after sundown, too, Steve was utterly lost; they might for all he knew be heading toward Tylerville or directly away from it. He drew into his own shell and they rode in silence.

They were traveling a little-used, hidden trail that wound through brush and timber high on a slope, when Lang suddenly halted and stood tall in his stirrups, eyes hard on a rider in the more open trail that followed the narrow valley below. "By the old Harry," Lang breathed. "It's that old pup who slapped me with the mop."

The .45 did its casual slide upward into his right hand. He poised it carefully, gauging distance. "Long fer a six" he muttered, "but I bet I dang near do it."

He was bringing the weapon forward in slow deadly arc when Steve's dive swept Lang from the saddle. They struck rocky earth like an octopus wrapped around a windmill, all knees and elbows and clawing fingers that had no time to clench as fists. Lang's gun was knocked from his grip, somehow failing to discharge; Steve's weapon, characteristically ignored by himself, slid from its holster to be wrapped in the dust of battle. Dan Reilly disappeared along the winding trail below, blissfully unaware.

Lang's long corded neck was useful as a third arm, and all his granite-like cranium lacked was horns; it raked across Steve's nose to send blood flying, snapped back against the side of his jaw with force to have kayoed a lesser man.

Lang issuing the girl between himself and Deputy Zeb Coley, shooting around her, driving the deputy behind his corner.



Steve's fingers found uncombed hair to tangle in while he brought the heel of his other hand upward to trade nose for nose; the thick lower cartilage did not break as had Steve's bridge bone, but skin and the flesh close under it ripped painfully to the tune of a whiney rageful grunt from Lang, halted by Steve's shoulder jerked hard against his chin. Lang traded a boney thrusting knee for that

one, fingers of one hand groping meanwhile to find and grip a boot toe and bring it upward behind Lang's own body, setting the joints of Steve's left leg all awry.

They rolled then, Steve trying to ease the strain on his leg, Lang striving for leverage to snap ligaments or bone but somehow finding time to send home another knee and swing once more the solid

weapon on the end of his neck. Twice they rolled; then something flashed across Steve's vision an inch above his eyes, and his leg sagged limp as Lang's torturing grip let go.

LANG's body lay heavy on his own; Steve rolled it off and cocked an eye toward the snorting horse whose startled leap had ended on the jerk of a stepped-on bridle rein.

"Much obliged, mister," said Steve, and gravely saluted. "We hadn't rolled into your feet and made you kick, darned if I don't believe he had me licked *again*."

He got to his feet, testing each joint and muscle as he brought it into play. The twisted leg was painful but it held, and Steve knew by experience that in a few minutes tortured ligaments would readjust themselves. Lang still lay inert, blood soaking stringy hair. Steve knelt with exploring fingers; the hoof had struck a glancing blow, laying back the scalp from a two-inch ragged furrow but leaving intact the iron skull beneath.

"To a gent like Lang, just enough to make him good and mad when he comes to," thought Steve, and chuckled a little.

He borrowed most of Lang's badly torn shirt to wipe away the blood from his own broken nose, and sat going over the situation. This, he knew, ended all chance of further amicable relation with Lang. Lang the victor had been arrogant in canceling their grudge to invite Steve into his gang; Lang defeated would be a raging animal until the score was evened. From now it would be dog eat dog in the Lost Injun Hills, and Lang and his friends bore no stifling inhibitions; they would drop a bullet on Steve Quade from any angle and without a "Sorry, Please." While Steve, poor sucker, must come out of the brush and wave his gun and warn his victims.

"Puts me between the devil and the deep blue frying pan," Steve reflected. "Lang and his bunch will do for the devil, and Jim Cross' frying pan has got bars on it. Just for now, I've got Lang under control. But I can't use any prisoners, and if I took him in to Jim Cross the way

things stand, I'd just get laughed at. Scrapper Quade: lidda snowy lamb among the wooly wolfs. Dad said for me to find some really tough guys and learn what they're like; I guess I'm doing same."

Customary owlhoot, he knew, was to head fast for Mexico or Canada, roping fresh mounts as he needed them from loose range horses that would not soon be missed; waiting on foreign soil for the hue and cry to wane—or Jim Cross to dig up evidence to clear him. But here Quade stubbornness barred the way.

"Danged if I run," he said aloud, and found his gun and cleaned it of dust, letting his mind hack at the problem while his fingers were busy. Lang had his troubles too; someone had skinned the brands from a couple of cattle and that had worried Lang. Why? Steve could not answer that; perhaps a few stolen McDammit animals, already rebranded, had drifted home again. Who? Someone suspicious that cattle were being stolen. Mooncalf McDammit of course, or some of his henchmen.

"No one that knows Mooncalf real well is apt to fool with his cattle," Sheriff Jim Cross had said. A man like that, once suspicious, would gather in what threads he could and use them for unofficial hangings. And he would listen to Steve Quade's story and accept his help.

"And I've got a ringleader right here," Steve chortled aloud. He would take Lang in and turn him over to McDammit, and from there the firm of Quade and McDammit would make things hum.

LANG stirred and groaned a little. Steve hastily cut a couple of saddle-strings from Lang's saddle and bound his wrists together. In front, since Lang was going riding. That brought Lang all the way out of the fog and he tried to get on his feet, but Steve rested a knee at the fork of his ribs and explained their new relationship. Lang cursed him then in his chuckling monotone, reminding that Steve himself dare not go near Jim Cross.

"It's McDammit's we're going to," Steve retorted. Lang gave a surprised gasp and Steve could feel his body quiver a little under the restraining knee. "Don't like that, eh?"

"How you gonna get me there?" Lang taunted. "You don't know the way—and besides, s'posen I refuse to git on that horse?"

"I'll lead you on a throw rope, afoot, and by the neck," Steve countered. "And the longer it takes me to find McDammit's, the blistereder your feet will get."

"O-K," Lang agreed. "You kin be Brer Fox a while."

He got to his feet and climbed awkwardly into the saddle, and it was not until much later that Steve realized the lanky man really had read his Uncle Remus.

As all roads once led to Rome, deemed Steve, so must all trails in the Lost Injun Hills lead to—or from—the Moon-and-a-Half. He looped his rope around Lang's middle and tied it to his own saddlehorn, with a curt, "Up to you to keep coming," and led the way downslope to the wellmarked trail Dan Reilly had been traveling. There he hesitated, and Lang chuckled mockery. But Steve guessed at his bearings from the stars now beginning to show, and chose the direction Reilly had been leaving. An hour later they rounded a hill to meet the blink of lights across flat open valley.

CHAPTER VI

Rustlers' Ranch

STEVE had hoped to approach quietly and find a chance to talk with McDammit alone. But the great wooden ranchyard gate screeched a tomcat's nightmare as he swung it open, and from shadows near the long bunkhouse a dog barked frantically. Someone quieted the dog, but made no answer to Steve's low hail though Steve had the feeling of being watched.

"I reckon the citified house this side the bunkshack will be McDammit's private tepee," Steve decided, and motioned Lang toward it with Lang's own six-shooter. Curtained windows sifted mellow light on them as they mounted the wide porch; a door swung gently open, and for the second time Steve saw Mooncalf McDammit as a blocky solid figure framed in light. He must have recognized them in advance through the window, for he said instantly: "Come in, Lang—Quade."

Something about Lang's bearing made Steve press him closely as they entered, fearing a trick. But Lang only stepped to the room's center and faced about, features wooden though mockery lurked behind the hatred in his eyes. Steve himself halted in amazement just beyond McDammit, eyes wide as the swelling from his broken nose permitted.

For across the room, their pained ex-

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pressions belying the pleasant chairs they occupied, sat Sheriff Jim Cross and Deputy Zeb Galey.

"Howdy, son," the sheriff greeted matter-of-factly. "Figured you'd drop in here, give you time. . . . Y' dropped your wire, Mooncalf."

Sheriff Jim's face was bruised and bloody, tired and worn, and the holster at his hip gaped empty; Zeb Galey ditto.

"Better kind of put your gun away, Quade," Deputy Zeb advised dryly, jerking his chin toward a corner where stood a hard-faced man with a shotgun. "Stubbornness ain't no match f'r a sawed-off not to mention the hawleg Mooncalf is focusing on your spine."

Decision was not left to Steve: at that instant the barrel of McDammit's hogleg cracked across his wrist and the gun in his hand went flying. Lang scooped it in his close-tied hands before it struck the carpet, its muzzle whipping toward Steve like the head of a striking snake. But McDammit's voice was quicker, and McDammit was not kibitzing now.

"Hold it, Lang. No shooting here."

The words might have been that many buckshot, in their stopping power. To Steve's amazement Lang let the weapon sag in his fingers, and the blaze died from his eyes as they turned to McDammit.

"Well. I can see who 'the boss' is now," Steve commented quizzically, left hand nursing his bruised wrist. "It sure don't jibe, though, with what I heard in that hotel."

"It ain't occurred to you, then, that what you heard might work two ways?" Jim Cross gently hinted. Steve thought that one over and nodded.

"We're in a tight, Lang," McDammit was explaining curtly. "The law has had its throw-rope down, skinning brands. And this Quade buttinsky is just what we need to get us out. You'll have your fun—that head of yours looks like you got it comin'—but out in the hills where we can make things look natural."

"Umm. Butcher Lang, wanted here and there for this and that—all of it mean," Jim Cross coolly interrupted. "Too bad

I could never get an eye on you in Tyler-ville."

"You'd only have got hurt," Lang told him arrogantly. "What you got figgered, Mooncalf?"

IT'S made to order—Quade wanted; Jim Cross and Galey s'posed to be hunting him in the hills. Shoot-out: three down. Kerney'll do some surmising, of course—no tellin' how much he knows. But we get rid of what wrong brands we got, you boys driftin' outa the country with the stuff—and where's there any proof?"

"Slick," Lang agreed. "Quade's gang been stealin' moon cattle all along of course. Oyeh: and he killed Diddel this afternoon. Stub's camp—Diddel follered him there."

"By the way, Diddel seen me and you that morning by the stable. But he didn't hear much, and hadn't guessed it was anything to blab."

"Fine," McDammit exulted. "Dead, he can't talk and he's one more item to make the picture fit. The neighbors will say 'I told you so' and agree that Diddel had Quade pegged right all the time. I'll hire local hands again, grievin' how Quade must have had a couple of plants among my strangers."

He laughed, and Lang chuckled, and even the hard-faced silent man in the corner grinned a little; though his shotgun relaxed not a whit its blank glare at Steve's lean middle.

"You gents are sure liberal with your planning," Steve complained. "Me of course I've been paid for ever since Lang killed Bill Dollar—and then Diddel—and hung it onto me. But ain't you a little rough on Jim Cross and Zeb?"

"I'm kind of sorry about them two," McDammit admitted, and there was sincerity in his tone. "But it's a case of them or me, and I need me to run this ranch of mine. . . ."

"Lang, I reckon we better settle up and pass the cash around, eh?—so's to get goin' first crack of daylight."

Lang nodded, and McDammit crossed the room and went into another. Through

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the open door Steve could see a desk and the corner of a small safe. McDammit knelt by the safe and tumblers clicked, and suddenly the big man was swearing viciously.

He came back into the room still swearing, and his face had gone white under its tan.

"Lang," he said as if himself still a little unbelieving, "the damn' book is gone. Gone right out of the safe."

Lang's lank body stiffened, and his eyes were hard on McDammit. "How about the cash? Gone too, I reckon."

McDammit caught his inflection, and his eyes were as hard and his voice as soft as Lang's. "Nope. Not enough to miss easy, anyway. Which leaves your boys out. And: don't you put yourself out to be a bigger fool than usual."

Lang flushed. "Sorry. Knowed better, but I spoke too quick. How about Cross or Galey?"

"Couldn't be them. I seen that book today—about the time the boys trapped 'em and brought 'em in." McDammit was worried; that book in wrong hands could tell too tall a tale. He paced the room, and in a moment spoke again.

"I been a fool, I guess. Overlooked a bet. Dan Reilly back in the country, holin' up on what's left of his old ranch. Havin' his gal with him fooled me some, I reckon. But Dan's one of the few old-timers could injun around these tricky hills without our boys spottin' him. And he hates my guts for them fourteen years he just finished in the Montana pen."

He stopped suddenly and turned on the seated sheriff with one finger aimed like a pistol. "You Jim Cross! What started you lookin' at brands? Dan Reilly, hunh?"

SUDDEN and forceful, that, and might have flustered another man. But Jim Cross met McDammit's glare with mild interest only, and the little puzzled frown of a man probing memory.

"Dan Reilly? He's the old gent slapped Lang with the mop, eh?—and testified at the inquest on Bill Dollar."

Lang's eyes were a blaze of hate on Steve. "I seen the old pup not ten miles from here, just at dark. And if it hadn't been fer this Quade thing, that book'd be safe right now."

He explained, and McDammit nodded his certainty.

"Dan it is. But he's our meat, because he'll circle from where you seen him and go by his ranch instead of ridin' straight to Tylerville. He'd never leave his gal alone, knowin' we'd soon miss that book and—"

Jim Cross had been eyeing McDammit quizzically. He cut in now with a shrewd question: "How come Reilly could get into a locked safe? Ranchers ain't usually good at pickin' locks."

For the first time in Steve's brief knowledge of the man, McDammit flushed and was embarrassed.

"I—uh—you see—well, dammit: I got that safe from Dan's wife, right after he . . . went away. Dan'd got it in a trade someplace. And—and—"

"—and you never changed the combination!" Jim Cross finished swiftly for him, and McDammit reddened further under five sardonic grins. Nevertheless his voice was crisp and his orders detailed, and Jim Cross sighed as Lang and the hard-faced man took in every word; Jim Cross had hoped to start an argument and shake McDammit's leadership, and give Dan Reilly time.

Five men at the bunkhouse, Lang to lead them. Dan Reilly to be fetched alive if possible, his daughter left unhurt. Above all, *git* that book! With it back in McDammit's hands, and a four-handed shoot-out charade arranged for Judge Kerney's finding, any future talk by the girl could be charged to normal spite against the Moon-and-a-Half for "siccin' Jim Cross onto her cow-thief dad."

"Sounds slick," Lang agreed, and paused only to let his eyes play over Steve Quade, a cat enjoying his mouse. "Take good care of the Quade thing," he admonished McDammit. "Me, I crave my fun when I git back."

And he would be back.

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CHAPTER VII

"... a woman to bury!"

McDAMMIT grinned at Steve. "A good hater, the Butcher; and about as gentle as a hungry magpie." He got a small tangle of wire from the floor near the door and began straightening it, carefully out of line with the shotgun.

Jim Cross had shifted his chair, leaning its back against the wall, front legs off the floor. His eye caught Steve's and Steve was almost sure of the tiny flutter of an eyelid. But the old sheriff seemed wholly relaxed, hands resting casually on the edge of the chair between spread thighs. His mild voice dragged its drawl along: "You've got her figured close, Mooncalf—far as I can see there's just one leetle point you've overlooked. Slick, the way you've worked this rustlin'. Kept your neighbors happy, so's they'd steer off anybody that got suspicious and come lookin' in this direction. I bet you never stole a cow from closer'n a hundred miles, eh?"

"Farther'n that," McDammit beamed. "Closest was the X-Bar, around two hundred miles. And we've not only laid off the neighbors ourselves, we've seen to it nobody else bothered 'em either. Remember them five strangers that was found shot to death on Peoples Creek a few years back, kind of mysterious? Well, the gents undertook to drive off a bunch of nester cattle."

He held up a length of wire as if measuring it, untangled another foot or so and nibbled at Jim Cross' bait; "What's this point you claim I'm overlookin'?"

But the sheriff was not ready.

"Slick. Slick," he murmured, wagging his head. "Slipped up once though, on Dan Reilly. Howcome he hates you so special? I know he got sent up, over in Montana, for tryin' to put a bunch of stolen horses through the saleyard. But a while ago, you talked like you had some connection with it?"

"Wasn't really my fault—just one of them things that can't be avoided. I liked Dan." There was real regret in McDam-

mit's tones. Hypocrite through-and-through, Steve reflected, and found agreement in the contemptuous glint in the eyes of Deputy Zeb. "Y'see, them horses was lifted by Long Charley from that very Miles City district Dan took 'em back to. I'd taken 'em off Long Charley's hands and unloaded 'em on Dan, naturally supposin' Dan would keep 'em or sell 'em locally. That was the time he give me the check you've heard about, and hung the nickname on me. Which has been worth a lot"—he grinned at Steve—"by leadin' strangers to figure me a nickel shy. Though I was kind of sore at the time..."

He bent the straightened wire into three equal lengths and began twisting to break it, and shot his question again, this time in more insistent tones: "What's this you claim I'm overlookin'?"

But the sheriff's ear still caught the clink of iron shoes on rocky trail. He countered with: "That all sounds kind of accidental, and no occasion for Reilly to go plumb hydrophoby. What else you do to him?"

"Well, when I found out Dan was takin' them horses right back home, naturally I had to protect myself," McDammit enlarged, a little sulky, but a little proud too of his handling of the fourteen-year-old affair. "Had a feller steal back the bill of sale, and talked Dan out of the canceled check for a keepsake. Then I happened to be in Miles City the day of his trial. Just like I'd figured, the dern cuss tried to drag me into his trouble. Reckognized me in the courtroom and had 'em put me on the stand. Naturally I had to testify I knowed nothing atall about it, and—well, that jury figured Dan was lying all the way, and whopped it to him... Now, dang it—what's this oversight you keep hintin' about?"

"**W**HY, just—just this..." Jim Cross' weight leaned forward onto his spread feet and the chair came between his legs in a sweeping underhand toss straight at the shotgun's muzzle, his body following in headlong plunge at the knees of the hardfaced man. The chair

was flung back with a great buckshot hole through the hardwood thickness of its seat, but it had put the hard-faced man off balance and even his second barrel did damage only to McDammit's floor, inches behind the flying heels of Sheriff Cross. Zeb Galey had it then and bent the barrels, and the hard-faced man went to sleep in the sheriff's unloving arms.

Meantime Steve had waded in, fists flying, and promptly found himself beyond his depth. McDammit's rounded body was a thing of gristle and McDammit's fists were dynamite and the air was full of them. Steve looked up from the floor to see McDammit's .45 come out of its holster in a draw that equaled Lang's, and Steve kissed himself good-by; but Zeb Galey got there in time with swinging steel and McDammit's head rang like a gong.

"Kind of hot and quick—and lucky." Jim Cross' mild voice cooled the room. "Good thing this shotgun gent got interested in listenin' too. Hand us that wire, Quade."

Once again Steve had that feeling of a small boy casually ignored by his elders. Expertly sheriff and deputy applied their wire; gravely, with the spoken brevity of men used to each other, they made their plans. "Take 'em two hours, eh? Maybe three. . . . Lights like they are, ever'-thing looking natural. Us outside in the dark. . . . Lock this door so's they can't get inside—bunkhouse door too. Here's a key. . . ." Jim Cross found buckshot shells and a second shotgun and handed them to Steve. "Me and Zeb will use our sizes. Be dang sure how you point that thing. . . . Naw, we trust you right enough. It's just that it's gonna be hot, and you're kind of an amateur."

They gagged their victims—"You talk too much anyhow, Mooncalf" — and staked them in a clump of trees well out of the way. "Put on some coffee, Zeb, and I'll rustle up their beef-quarter. Ought to be hangin' out back. . . . Nope, Quade: we go faunchin' off in the dark we maybe miss 'em altogether. And whatever damage they do would be done while we was on the way."

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They ate belated supper and smoked a pair apiece of cigarettes, and their time of waiting passed—for sheriff and deputy—as casually as if waiting for a train or stage. The final hour was spent outside, letting their eyes get used to darkness, prowling to acquaint themselves with the setup of buildings and fences and trees. By the time Jim Cross's keen ears picked up the clang and pound of shod hooves, he and Zeb Galey were as much at home as men might be after living here for years.

"Bright lads," Jim Cross murmured, prone beside Steve under the tree opposite McDammit's house. "One 'way in the lead, and I bet another is trailin' as far behind . . . Hmm—trick to that gate; kin be opened quiet if you know how. . . . By grab! Lang went against orders and fetched the girl!"

THE lead man stayed afoot holding the open gate. Six riders came through. They bunched inside and milled a little, and Steve heard Dan Reilly cursing in hopeless monotone, and Lang's brittle rattlesnake chuckle. A hand popped on flesh, and Lang's voice and chuckle rose again. "Spunky, hah? I'll take that outa you on our way to Mexico."

Jim Cross's hand checked Steve's rise, his murmur no louder than breath yet clear and urgent: "Hold it. Want that last man in. And when it starts, you work the fringes with that scattergun. Me and Zeb will do the close shootin' . . . Here he comes."

The rear scout rode through the gate, and the man on foot closed it behind him. Jim Cross came erect like six feet of smoke. Zeb Galey, across the open space by the house corner, matched him for smooth silence. Steve came up more slowly striving for equal quiet.

Riders were dismounting, those still mounted gathering the extra bridle reins. One horse suddenly lunged to the group's edge, the girl's figure silhouetted; but the animal was quickly halted and the girl jerked afoot. The group thinned, and light from the windows showed Lang

half-dragging the girl toward the porch. Two others flanked Dan Reilly.

"Now," breathed Sheriff Cross. "You git them that's startin' to the barn, Quade." For the first time in Steve's acquaintance his voice rose to a staccato bark: "'Zup, you!"

Instantly the storm broke. Lang only shifted the girl to his left arm and kept going, but five whirled as if Jim Cross had jerked a string; and as they whirled they fired. A voice only for target, but bullets spat the trees all around Jim Cross and Steve.

Steve's first barrel flung the rider nearest the stable from his horse like a straw dummy in a high wind. But the next man's mount reared in fright at the powder flash and stopped the buckshot with its head, the rider kicking free to drop, shooting, behind his barricade of flesh.

Of the two handling Dan Reilly, one went down under Jim Cross's first bullet. The other brought his gunbarrel 'round in vicious arc to drop Dan Reilly at his feet, then himself slumped with two Jim Cross's bullets in him; though shooting twice on his way down. Jim Cross made sure of him with another bullet, felt his hat tug at its sweatband even while he pulled the trigger. The man who had closed the gate dropped two sets of bridle reins to steady his second shot, but Zeb Galey from across the way spoke up with his first bullet and its mate, and the gate-closer took two stumbling unnatural steps and pitched forward, dead as he hit the ground.

Meantime Lang swung the girl between himself and Zeb Galey, shooting around her, driving Zeb behind his corner. Lang mounted the porch then, crabwise to make use of his struggling shield; crossed it and tried the door and faced about, cursing, backing into the shallow niche of the door's casings, cannily withholding his fire since he could never reload while still controlling the girl. A bad moment that must have been for Lang.

"Might as well toss out your gun, Butcher," Jim Cross's mild voice crossed

the yard. "You ain't got a chance."

"Yeah," Lang mocked; "toss out my gun and come stand trial, and git fitted with a rope necktie. Come *git* me, tin-badge."

BUT the man by the dead horse felt differently, with his rear exposed to Zeb Galey's fire and window light directly on him. He came slowly erect with empty hands held high, and stepped around the horse toward Jim Cross and Steve. From the porch Lang cursed him for a quitter and flipped a shot that ripped the man's thigh; leveled the gun to aim more carefully, reckless of ammunition in his rage. But this one was born to a rope and not a bullet; at the instant of Lang's firing the girl threw her weight against him, and Lang's bullet only helped the fellow break all records for one-legged sprinting to the shelter of the trees.

"All wolf," sighed Jim Cross as he applied baling wire. "A wonder he didn't shoot the girl for that, or swipe her with his gunbarrel."

But Lang had a better idea. "You, Jim Cross! Me and this gal is ridin' double out of here. Have Galey catch that buckskin yonder and tie him to the porch, open the gate and shoo them other horses through it, and then git over there so's you're all on one side. You make a pass, or don't git the buckskin here by time I count to thirty, you've got a woman to bury."

For a frozen moment the men in the yard stood helpless. Lang had his reputation to back the threats he made; Lang of all men would be ready to shoot a woman—rather and more messily, to crush her skull with his gunbarrel and save his bullet for law. Lang had courage too; and he was a cornered wolf with choice only between two ways of dying.

Through it all the girl had kept a tight-lipped silence, struggling in Lang's grip, kicking backward at his shins until Lang's forearm across her larynx left no breath for battle. She looked now at her father lying twenty feet away with no life apparent in him, and her voice rose

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in steady tones without hysteria; desperate but unafraid.

"Shoot him! He abused my dad and killed him. And you know what will happen if I leave here with him. Never mind me, I tell you—*shoot!*"

Lang let her talk, knowing what the girl did want: that the courage in her challenge was his surest guarantee against Jim Cross.

"You've got till I count twenty," he told the yard, and added a bitter afterthought: "If you'd give me just one clear shot at that damn' Quade, I'd agree to turn her afoot a mile from here. She'll be a nuisance anyhow, the way I've got to travel."

For once Jim Cross was treed. Zeb Galey, too; and Zeb started across the yard to catch the buckskin horse. But in Steve Quade's mind his part in this affair stood suddenly as clear and sharp as the hate in Lang's chuckling voice.

"You, Lang!" he called. "You talk big. But how'd you like to fight me again—this time for keeps?"

Lang's answer would have lighted a cigarette. Steve sent his shotgun end-over-end to clatter in the yard.

"Well, then. Toss your gun by that one, and walk out here to meet me. You finish me, you go scotfree, with the buckskin horse and both guns and ten minutes' start. Right, sheriff?"

"Right, Lang." Jim Cross's voice carried mixed relief and disappointment along with the ring of truth. "You've got my word. But the girl walks out here first."

"I reckon I got as good a chance that way as any," Lang decided almost at once; "and how my fists do itch!"

He gave the girl a spiteful shove toward Jim Cross and paused, cannily, to reload before tossing his .45 to fall near the shotgun. The girl caught her balance, turned, and ran to kneel by her father. He stirred and groaned, and she ran to the pump and brought water. In a moment Reilly was sitting up groggily with his head against her shoulder.

MEANTIME Steve and Butcher Lang met in a surge of hate that gave no heed to tired muscles and old bruises. No wariness here and no calculated tactics; uppermost the brute instinct to get in close and rend. For the first time in his life Steve Quade had the urge to kill—not merely to beat down to defeat this man he faced, but to break his bones and draw his blood and stamp his lifeless body into the earth. It was a taste in his mouth and a stench in his nostrils and a desire in his loins, and nothing this side his own death could stop him now.

They came together near the dead horse, and Lang hooked too short and brought his elbow back to rake Steve's sorely swollen nose, but Steve rode the elbow in without awareness of pain.

Steve was forced all the way backward, flat over the horse's ribs, Lang trying to follow with his own body but thereby losing leverage on his legs so that Steve was able to tear loose and roll away across the horse; leaving on the spur's rowels shreds of flesh from a gash that missed windpipe narrowly.

They came to their feet then on opposite sides of the horse and for a moment stood panting. Lang saw the six-shooter his ex-cohort had dropped, and made a dive for it, but remembered in time and straightened empty-handed; and gusty sighs of disappointment stirred the yard air near both Jim Cross and Deputy Zeb.

"Git him a leetle madder, Quade—and then work him over closer to that shotgun," Zeb counseled dryly. "I won't be so tardy nex' time."

"You want he should take them spurs off?" Jim Cross inquired in more practical vein.

But Steve heard neither remark in his absorption with the figure framed in red haze before him. In straightening after his reach for the gun Lang stumbled over the horse's legs, and Steve was around the horse and at him savagely. Lang went down under a head blow that broke a bone in Steve's hand, but rolled away and came to his feet and backed a few darting steps to catch his balance.

They stood erect then and slugged, across the yard and to the porch and up its few steps; and locked body-to-body and surged the porch's length and crashed through the window into the lighted front room, without a break in hostilities.

OUTSIDE the girl had let down and was sobbing now on her father's shoulder. Zeb Galey stood cursing softly, unaware that his arms ached from the tension of hard-clenched fists. Through the window came the sounds of furniture-smashing struggle. Thud of blows, jangle of glass as the lamp was knocked to the floor and flickered out; darkness slowed the fighters not a whit in their crashing from wall to wall.

Then suddenly all sound ceased, and even Jim Cross stood holding his breath.

It was Steve who clambered out the broken window and staggered across the porch and sat limply on its rail.

"By golly, I finally licked him on an even break," he told the yard and himself and the world when breath would let him, and answered Jim Cross's urgent question: "Nope. Still yours to hang, far as I could tell in the dark. He'll wait, though."

The sheriff hastened with his baling wire, and the girl left her father and mounted the porch near Steve, to stand timidly, searching for words of thanks. Inside Jim Cross found another lamp, and light flooded them through the windows that were curtainless now. The girl gave a little gasp and raised her hands impulsively to Steve.

"Oh! Your poor, poor face!"

"Better get used to it," Steve advised, and took full advantage of her outstretched hands. "You're going to be looking at it for a long, long time. Not that it's going to look like this again. I have now seen some tough guys—really tough, like dad said—and from here on your Steve is Peaceful Quade."

"... Only, darned if I let dad's foreman push me around."

A moment later Jim Cross opened the door and glanced at them, and turned hastily to blow out the light.

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Rainbow Express

(Continued from page 29)

Mamma Dople's landing, and besides he lacked the time to thank her now for the very big favor she had done him. He changed mounts once at an outlying pioneer ranch, and flogged into Placerville in midafternoon.

To his satisfaction, he found Derby Duncan in the Quigley office, showing surprise at Lex's arrival but no alarm. "Well! What's up?"

Lex fixed him with a cold, hard stare. "Duncan, you've got some explaining to do! Quite by chance, last night, I opened a special deposit from Placerville! I found the poke stuffed with junk!"

The man's reaction told him several things. Derby Duncan stared, less in surprise now than in abrupt alarm. Lex smiled grimly, certain that Duncan did not know of the runs on the Marysville and Sacramento offices. So he was staggered and thrown off guard by what he considered to be a slip in the plans.

"Well?" Duncan jerked out.

"It had to be you, Derby. Just the other day you intimated that you figured the Quigley Express was going under. You said you were too old to start running express again and too soft to dig a living from the ground."

"Listen, Lex!" Duncan said desperately, "don't forget that the stuff sometimes comes through here from Logtown! You talked to Lurt Hamley about this yet?"

"No. It was you, Derby, and I'm taking you in with me!"

Little by little Lex read signs that told him he was succeeding with his efforts. He was sure now that Duncan was not the leader in the enterprise. Forced thus to his own devices Duncan was panicky. His attempt had not been so much to throw the blame to Lurt Hamley, or even to cloud the issue, as it was to discover just how much Lex suspected. Lex had a feeling that, left to

his own devices, Derby Duncan would head straight for Jud Clement, or else Lurt Hamley, for instructions and help. Which might lead one Lex Quigley to the king pin. He could almost see such a plan forming in the other's mind.

Duncan smiled weakly, and his voice turned wheedling. "Look here, Lex! I ain't got nothing to be scared of! But you're forgetting one thing. I'm ready to go in and stand any investigation you want to make. But I'm telling you, I'm not the one you're after! And your taking me in'll tip off Lurt Hamley, or whoever it is, and give him a chance to cover up. Why don't I go with you, and we'll pick him up by surprise, at the same time! I'm so sure I can clear myself, I'm ready to play along that way with you!"

After a moment's consideration, Lex nodded. "I'm willing to give you an even break, Derby. We'll do it that way. We'll go back by Logtown."

To Lex's surprise, Derby Duncan made no effort to break away from him on the long ride to Logtown, though much of it was in the night, and though Lex purposely kept no gun or other restraint on him, hoping that he would make a try. They rested for a few hours in the middle of the night, for the trail was very dark, and when they reached Logtown in midmorning, Lex understood Duncan's docility.

JUD CLEMENT was in Lurt Hamley's store, and both men looked excited. They whirled toward Lex when he strode into the building, accompanied by a now grinning Derby Duncan. Hamley recovered from it first.

"Howdy, Lex—and Derby! You're about the last pair I expected to see today!"

Lex let a cool gaze travel from Hamley to Clement. "Hamley, I want to ask you some questions. Somebody in this

neck of the woods has been sending down money dust pokes. I figured it was Derby, but he claims it was you. I want the truth and right now!"

"Now, I didn't put it that way, Lex," Duncan cut in. "When Lex told me he happened to look into a Placerville poke and found it full of brass filings—" He was clearly trying to convey to his confederates just what he had run up against.

Lex shot him a cold smile. "I never said brass filings, Derby, I said junk. Let's drop this silly pretense. You've done a good job of acting, worrying out loud about my business, writing me a letter to come up and look into things. The same as you did, Clement, by being oh, so honest about meaning to buck me on the American. I think I can give you a pretty good account of what you've really been up to. The whispering against QE and the torchings not only hurt me but, as you intended, led me to believe at first that the Fulton Express was behind it. The killing and robbery of Frank Fulton and his runner not only netted you a little side profit in dust, but caused Connie Fulton to believe I'd undertaken a criminal and dirty war!"

"That's a bunch of hot air!" Clement returned, yet with his eyes a little jeering.

Lex shook his head. "All that furnished you a cover for your real work. Which was to line your own pockets with somebody else's dust, break the QE and take over its routes. A clever, daring and grandiose scheme, my friends. But it failed. I haven't had time to call in the federal authorities, because a boy's life is in jeopardy here in Hangtown. For his sake, I'm willing to make you this kind of a deal. Fork over that dust so I can stop the rioting that's going on all through the country, and I'll see that you get a fair trial from the federal judiciary. If not, I'll turn you over to a miners' court and let you have a taste of what you tried to give Freddie Brawley!"

Jud Clement's eyes had begun gleam-



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ing coldly, and when he spoke his voice had lost its thin quality and carried a note of triumph, as if the man had too long brooded on this moment to let its full flavor escape him now.

"Go to the miners with your story, Quigley, and we'll be heroes! We've outfoxed you, all around! Duncan and Hamley got suspicious long ago that you were personally tampering with dust deposits—you and Pete Rankin! So they fooled you. To keep you from becoming suspicious before they could complete their case against you, they practiced a ruse. They kept the dust they received in their offices and sent you pokes filled with brass filings. Every ounce of dust either one ever receipted for is still in the company safes here and over in Placerville! So try and convince these miners and even your federal authorities that they had any criminal intentions! You speak of a miners' court! You're going to face one, Quigley, before you leave Hangtown—your coming here like this is all to the good! Remember, two expressmen running out of Hangtown lost a lot of dust—to say nothing of their lives. This is about the biggest hornets' nest in the diggings, right now! Here's something you don't know. Jake Carney was our man inside your office in Sacramento. The pokes taken from Frank Fulton and the other dead runner showed up in your room down there, under the Fulton Express seal! Carney found them the day you come up in response to Derby's letter, and he called in Tom Burns, the newspaper editor, to witness the fact!"

CHAPTER VIII

As he listened, the shock going through Lex Quigley thawed to bewilderment and then anxiety. He had been at every disadvantage, since the scheme this trio had perfected lent itself to absolute secrecy and so could be implemented point by point with nothing outward to arouse suspicion. Even yet there was no tangible evidence against them. It was as if substantial earth had

suddenly caved in under his feet.

Then Lurt Hamley spoke again, his customary joviality giving way to a cruel, crafty gleam. "Your coming to Hangtown at just this time will be your undoing, Quigley. There's mob talk against Freddie Brawley, now that word's come up about the big dust steal in your offices down country. Folks hereabouts'll be delighted to make it a double hanging!"

Lex was ready to concede that. The early morning streets had been deserted when he and Derby Duncan rode in, but word of his presence would soon get around; if it had not already these three would see to it. The story they could tell, after what had transpired down below, would sound more plausible than the truth; they had seen to that, too. Lex understood now why Duncan had been eager to get to Clement, who doubtless had engineered it all. And right now it looked as though Clement had put the finishing touches on with a fine hand.

"There's only one trouble with your devilish scheme!" Lex retorted. "Jake Carney's in Sacramento, and you'll need his testimony."

Clement smiled. "Carney's up here. He's the man that brought in the news. He was on the move all night, but he's sleeping, right now. But I don't reckon he'll mind us waking him up if we need him."

So that was why Carney had not put in his appearance at the Sacramento office! Rotten—rotten—his organization had been everywhere rotten! And even yet this trio had not openly incriminated itself, even to Lex, with their brazen pretense that they really believed the neat story they had fabricated.

He faced them, now. He was unarmed, for a gun had never fit naturally in his hand. Yet he was a powerfully built man, and he saw that he was apt to have to beat his way out of this immediate situation with hard hammering fists. He gathered himself, taking an unconscious backward step.

The resolve died in him. Liberty was

of no value to him without reputation and honor and all the things forming the complexity of his personality. Clearly he saw now what Mamma Dopley had meant. Inordinate desire was a sordid and treacherous thing, leading men on a downward spiral to perdition. Making some mysterious joke of her own, nature had under-larded the soil of northern California with the most powerful mass stimulant known to man. Abruptly he hated gold.

The real values of human life were intangible and immeasurable, and what was better they led to wholesome satisfaction, mutual welfare and richness of the spirit. It was not wrong that men should have come to this vast and virgin country, but they should have come as constructors, not as despoilers. He seemed to have learned that too late.

With this thinking, it was as if a breath of clean air blown through him, and abruptly he was not afraid of the sinister trio, of the prospective, falsely inflamed miners' court. Though not without struggle and cost, truth and right and the fine clean things of living would prevail. He was suddenly certain of that.

"Clement," he said calmly, "let's call a town meeting. Let's tell them our stories. I'm willing to gamble on the outcome."

Jud Clement appeared by no means to have lost his faith in the power of force and cunning and position. He grinned.

"That's being sensible, Quigley. For you've got to, whether you want to or not!"

ANGRY-FACED miners were thronging the street, Lex discovered when he emerged with Jud Clement beside him, the other two moving with watchful eye behind. Lex stepped across the high walk in front of Lurt Hamley's store, placed his hands on the hitch rail and sent his voice ringing:

"Gather around, men! We've got something to discuss that involves all of us. Jud Clement and I have contra-

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dicting stories to tell you. All I ask is that you remain orderly until you've heard them, and that you act as the jury. I'm willing to abide by the outcome!"

He knew instantly that it was going to provide a supreme test for his newfound faith in the ultimate triumph of decency and truth. There wasn't a man in the mottled crowd that quickly formed whose features did not show concern, indignation and animosity. As he had felt before when he faced such a crowd in Sacramento, Lex found no blame in his heart now. Probably ninety per cent of those men were honest and useful members of society. They believed they had been deceived and cheated, and the instinct to resent and retaliate such was deep in the human breast.

"By now," Lex resumed, striving to keep his voice calm and reasonable, "everybody has heard of what's been happening in connection with the Quigley Express. So I'll be brief. I've come here to charge Jud Clement, Derby Duncan and Lurt Hamley with a gigantic gold-stealing scheme. They fomented a baseless war between the Fulton and Quigley Express to confuse the issue. Behind it, their purpose was simple: to get away with as much dust as they could, get the Quigley Express blamed for it, then to take over the Quigley circuits themselves.

"I'm spiking one of their guns right now by telling you Quigley is still solvent and your dust is safe. Your deposits are still here in Hangtown, though Jud Clement doesn't like my telling you this, because, after he has provoked you into hanging me, he means to get away with it. Even if he succeeds in getting me hanged, my advice to you is that you insist on Lurt Hamley opening his safe in your presence, before he's had a chance to get in there privately."

Lex knew that this move had staggered Jud Clement and his two cronies, and it electrified the crowd. Lex was gambling on one thing, stemming from an insight into human nature. Clement had not anticipated having his tricky

device turned so quickly against him. On the other hand, with their gold restored to them in full, the hanging spirit in the miners would subside considerably. And Lurt Hamley would have a lot of explaining to do as to why he had kept the gold here in the hills, where it would be easy pickings for the *banditti*, instead of forwarding it to the out-country as had been their wish. With that kind of a situation, Lex Quigley would have a fighting chance.

"Let's look into it right now, boys!" a miner yelled. "Hamley, shake your fat carcass and dial that there safe!"

"He's lying!" Jud Clement yelled. "A desperate lie to confuse you!"

"Then open that safe and show us!"

"He trying to cover up murder, as well as thievery!" Clement went on. "You men remember the two Fulton men who were killed and robbed near here! A couple of days ago those pokes, bearing the Fulton seal, were found in Quigley's room in Sacramento! You don't have to take my word for that. You've all got a high opinion of Tom Burns and his paper. Tom Burns witnessed that discovery! And his paper'll be up here maybe today!" Jud Clement had not been slow to find a confusing resort of his own.

"It's here now," a voice called.

LEX'S heart sank, only to rise again. Connie Fulton had appeared on the edge of the crowd, carrying her leather pouch. Her boy's clothing was dusty and disheveled and she looked worn, and Lex guessed that she had pushed a hard, fast trail between Sacramento and Hangtown, for some reason. She loosened the flap of her pouch and began tossing out newspapers.

She saved the last for Lex and brought it to him, and for the first time she allowed herself a smile.

Lex saw at a glance that it was a special edition, the entire front page set up roughly and hastily and without Tom Burns' customary nicety of typography, and Lex read eagerly:

MINERS, CONSIDER!

It has never been the Bulletin's custom to take sides in controversial matters in the local gold fields, but in view of the panic sweeping the territory and the necessity for a widespread dissemination of certain information without delay, it feels justified in departing from its usual policy.

On the afternoon of Wednesday last an effort was made to perpetrate a gigantic hoax on the editor of the Bulletin. Instead of lending himself as a dupe, he is taking this means of exposing it.

Of common knowledge is the so-called express war between the Fulton and Quigley companies of recent weeks. At different times, the heads of these two organizations have called on the editor, who is convinced that neither was taking an active part in any sort of war and that both were the victims of this same widespread scheme of duplicity and dust-thieving.

Last Wednesday afternoon an employee of the Quigley organization called upon the editor to accompany him on a search of Lezington Quigley's Sacramento quarters, stating that he and certain others had reasons to believe that Quigley was involved or solely responsible for recent killings and robberies. The editor granted the request. A search of Quigley's rooms revealed a considerable quantity of gold dust, all under the Fulton seal.

These circumstances are indeed incriminating, and the only thing that prevented the editor from accepting them at face value was the fact that these dust pokes had been placed carefully in the top drawer of Quigley's commode, and the editor was obliged to remove them all before he found Quigley's razor. It being widely known that Quigley is one of the few men in these parts who shaves himself every day when he's in town, it was obvious that he would not have hidden his razor beneath all this gold dust. It was a point overlooked by the man who had planted the dust, and who could be no other than

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the one who had called me in for the search.

The Bulletin will make no charges through its columns, and it only asks that its readers refrain from action of a ruinous nature until the editor, in his private capacity as a citizen, can name names, places and dates to the proper authorities.

As he read in amazement, a great warmth was stealing through Lex Quigley. One by one, as they finished their own reading, miners were setting up the shout:

"Open your safe, Lurt Hamley! Tom Burns'd never have printed that lest he was sure of himself! Open up your safe!"

The crowd rushed the porch, surrounding Clement and his surprised assistants, began crowding them toward the door of the store.

Connie's eyes were shining. "Burns had more to go on than the fact that Jake Carney never thought to see what was under the dust he planted. I went to see Burns to try to get him to put out something to stop the rush on you, knowing the influence he had, I told him all I knew and all you'd told me. And it looks like he's turned the trick!"

There was pandemonium everywhere, but Lex discovered that he was not the center of it, any longer. He looked down at Connie, smiling.

"The next step, I think, should be a merger of Quigley and Fulton!"

"Just how do you mean?"

"I mean absolutely!"

"When?"

"Right now!"

And as he gathered her into his arms, he knew there was not the slightest objection.

The Fiddler Pays Off

(Continued from page 39)

"Why, you cold-footed yack—"

"Just a minute, Mister Walton. I haven't finished. I say to your face that you're guilty of Matt Legarus' murder. In my country that calls for a dose of lead poison. But I'm givin' you back your two minutes to clear out. It's too good a deal for a polecat like you but I've an i-dee Kathy Shannon would prefer it that way. Even hangin's too good for your breed."

While he talked, Trigger watched the wrath boil in Burn's slitted eyes. Deliberately, he had aroused the crafty ranchman to a heedless fury that left him unmindful of his audience.

"You talk big, you damned shorthorn. All right, what if I did kill Matt Legarus. I got what I wanted and I'm big enough to keep what I've got. Just to make sure of it, I'm going to shut you up—and for good. Nobody can talk to me like you just did and live to regret it."

With catlike thrusts, Burn flung his

hands to his black-handled pistols. He never raised the barrels above floor level.

Two shots exploded in the barroom like cannons in a cave.

Through the smoke, Trigger saw Burn Walton hang on buckled knees for an instant and then topple to the floor, twin bullet holes in his shirt.

He lifted his irons, training them on Burn's riders staring down at their fallen boss. Mouths agape, they backed toward the door. There they turned and ran for their horses.

Trigger dropped his Colts into their holsters. Expressionless, he looked at the crumpled figure before him. He felt neither elation nor remorse. He had given the man his chance—more than he deserved—and the man had refused it.

A lathered horse flashed past the barroom window. Trigger glanced up in time to recognize Kathy Shannon. She was looking in at him, pulling up her mount.

Trigger turned to the row of men at the bar. Not one had moved. He said, "All right, judge. Let's call on the sheriff and get that kidnaper's charge straightened out."

EXPECTANTLY, Trigger Carroll looked up when the sheriff returned to his office.

"All right, Alf," the sheriff said to the deputy sitting beside Trigger. "I'll take charge."

As their eyes met Trigger observed the officer's large mouth lose its sternness. "Come on, the judge wants to see you." A spreading smile lifted his sandy mustache. "I ain't never seen the judge so carefree. I guess Burn Walton was kind of a millstone on his neck. He says your claim to the Bar U is plumb legal. And if I was you, I wouldn't fret myself too much about that kidnaping count." He paused, taking delight in his burden of good news. "Besides, there's a lady who's asking about you."

They walked without speaking down the board walk to Judge Morrow's office. Kathy Shannon sat talking to him.

Doubtfully, Trigger scanned her small face. He was reassured by the approval in her wide gray-green eyes.

"Hello, Trigger," she said.

"Good evenin', ma'am."

Her quizzical expression gave way slowly to delight. "My, I hardly knew you—shaved and all. You're much younger than I thought you were."

"Well, ma'am, I'm past votin' age."

Her smile was warm. "I just had a talk with Judge Morrow and he told me about Burn Walton—and what happened. I want you to know I'm grateful to you."

"You're—you're not holdin' a grudge against me?"

Her happy laugh was music to him. "How can I hold a grudge against a neighbor? You are going to be my neighbor, aren't you?"

"Maybe I'd like that, ma'am. I was plumb homesick for Texas a while back but now— Could we ride out—out your way and sort of talk it over?"

"I'd love to, Trigger."

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A Coward Dies a Thousand Times

(Continued from page 43)

gart. There was a sense of sweet relief in this, his final and unshakable decision.

"Buddy," he called to the boy, and was surprised to find his voice had lost its quaver. "Take this bag to the baggage room and check it. Here's a dollar for yuh."

He left the astonished button holding a silver cartwheel.

ON the main street of Trail City, in front of the Silver Dollar, Cristy Daggart was stretching indolently, as if tired of a fruitless wait. Arms high above his head, he yawned in a bored manner, let his hands down slowly and hitched up his gun belt. He spat out into the road, sending up a yellow puff of dust. Turning, he made for the batwings.

"Daggart!"

The call snapped through the twilight air. Cristy Daggart spun around, startled.

Glen Barter, at the end of the block, saw the black figure stand motionless for a moment. Cowboys clumping along the board sidewalk caught the tenseness of the moment, flattened themselves against buildings. Barter kept on coming, up the middle of the street. Cristy Daggart looked around, as if to see how many hombres were watching him. He stepped off the walk, swaggered to the center of the road.

Barter never hesitated in his purposeful stride. The very physical effort required in walking kept his muscles from tightening up. He felt as if he were in a vacuum. There were only two persons in that void, he and Cristy Daggart. Nothing else moved or existed.

It was all very simple. He would just keep on walking until he was as close to Daggart as he had been to the yellow dog. Then he would draw and shoot the ex-bartender.

That fellow Shakespeare was right. You never tasted death until it hit you and then it was too late to feel it. Why hadn't he learned this long ago?

Cristy Daggart was only a hundred feet away now. Barter could see the tenseness of his stance.

A man couldn't remember being born, could he? Of course not. And a man couldn't remember being killed. You were here, out of the forever without knowing or remembering how. And you went back into the forever the same way.

He was fifty feet away now. Forty. Thirty. . . .

"Pitch up, yuh crazy fool!" It was Daggart's voice. And there was fear in it!

Daggart went for his gun. Barter wasn't surprised at seeing the black bore pointed at him. Wasn't surprised when it spouted flame. He didn't stop his rhythmic walk. And no bullet touched him. Had Daggart blown up?

Barter's own gun came up, easy, slowly. He shot carefully. The heavy bullet caught Daggart in the shoulder, spun him halfway around. The black-handled Colt dropped from numbed fingers. He flung his left hand in front of him.

"Don't shoot!" he gibbered. "Don't, Barter, don't!"

Barter kept on walking. Until he was within a foot of the panic-filled bully.

He reholstered his gun. Reached up and plucked a pasteboard from his hat band.

"Daggart, I got a little present for yuh. A one-way ticket. You're leaving town—I'm staying. Savvy?"

The vacuum had broken. Sound was pouring into it. Barter was conscious of running feet, of cheering voices, of friendly cries. He looked around.

"The drinks are on me, boys," he said, and made his way toward the Silver Dollar.

Business would be rushing tonight. Trail City was a hell of a good cattle town. And after work he'd have a date with a honey-haired girl with frosty blue eyes—that would melt into warm tenderness.

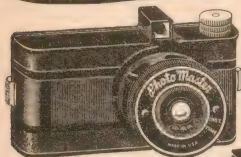
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GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION

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608 So. Dearborn St.—Chicago 5, Ill.

Priority Initial ☐ IN THIS BOX

Please rush Personalized Pop-Up Cigarette Cases checked off below. If not delighted I may return in 5 days for money back without question.

Pop-Up Case at \$1 each.

☐ I am enclosing \$_____ Sent postpaid.

☐ Send C.O.D. I will pay postman \$_____ plus postage.

Check Colors and Initial Desired.

☐ Jade Green ☐ Cadet Blue ☐ Red ☐ Ivory ☐ Black

Initial: _____ Initial _____ Initial _____ Initial _____

Name _____

Please Print Clearly

Address _____

City _____ Zone _____ State _____

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR CAMERA

NATIONAL NOVELTIES—Dept. PC 154
608 South Dearborn St.—Chicago 5, Ill.

Rush Photometer at \$1.50 with Carrying Case for only 2¢ extra. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back if returned within 10 days.

CHECK ONE

☐ I am enclosing \$4.98 for payment in full. Send Camera and Case Postpaid.

☐ Send Camera and Case C.O.D. I will pay postman \$4 plus postage return. If you want 2 rolls of No. 127 film (enough for 48 pictures) for only \$16 plus the postage and handling costs CHECK BELOW.

☐ I am enclosing \$4.98 for payment in full. Include 2 rolls of film postpaid.

☐ Include 3 rolls of film C.O.D. I will pay postman \$4.98 plus postage.

Name _____

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When answering advertisements please mention SPEED FICTION GROUP

Savage Surgery

PERHAPS the most brutal form of surgery ever brought to the attention of the civilized world has been that practised by the headhunters of the Amazon River country and the Solomon Islands. To the savages, though, it means only a rite and doubtless some of our boys in the Solomons have often been approached with the idea of buying shrunken heads for souvenirs.

As a matter of fact, a prominent New York curio shop used to feature in its windows a number of shrunken heads, all perfect in miniature, testimonials to the surgical arts of savages.

And head shrinking is really an art, as you'll realize now. The first step is the peeling.

This is done by carefully parting the hair straight down from the crown to the base of the skull, slitting the skin down the line formed by the parting until the skin may be taken off as one peels an orange. A little cutting is then done around the eyes, ears and nose to allow the flesh and muscles to come off the skin. The skull is then left clean and naked except for the eyes and teeth.

With a bamboo needle and *chambira* (palm-leaf fibre), the natives then sew together the slit from the crown to the base of the neck, leaving a small opening. The lips are then skewered with a few bamboo splinters about two and a half inches long and held together by strands of cotton fibre. By drawing down, the upper eyelashes the eyeholes are then closed, while props of bamboo, vertically set between the outer rims of the eyelashes, hold the latter in place, effectively keeping them from falling. Cotton is then applied as a temporary plug for the holes of nose and ears.

The purpose of these operations is to hold the features of the face in position and to seal the openings so that the head can again be expanded to its proper proportions. Expansion is accomplished by filling the head with hot sand.

It's different from sand in the craw.

THEN the head is ready for treatment by the medicine men, who have made crocks for the special occasion. These crocks, later filled with water to be boiled, are made with the utmost care, by the witch doctors, far from human eyes and under auspicious lunar conditions. There is a crock for every head.

The crocks, conical in shape and about eighteen inches in diameter by eighteen inches deep, are made of baked red clay. They are brought to the ceremonial fires carefully wrapped in palm-leaves and no unauthorized person may look at or touch them until the actual moment of the ceremony.

The boneless heads, filled with sand, are then placed in the cold water in the pots. It usually takes about a half hour for the water to reach boiling point and, when it does, the savage art of the headhunters reaches its zenith. For, the heads must be removed before the water actually boils! This is to prevent the softening of the flesh and the scalding of the roots of the hair, which would cause it to drop out.

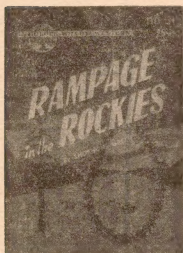
Upon removal, the heads are found to have shrunk to about one-third of their natural size. The pots are then cast away into the river, too holy to be used again, and the fires on which they stood are heaped with fresh logs, to heat the sand for the final step.

THE skulls are placed on spearheads and hot sand, heated by the fires, is placed into the heads at the neck opening. When filled, the heads are ironed out with hot stones, picked up with the aid of palm leaves. For forty-eight hours, the ironing continues until the skin is smooth and hard and as tough as tanned leather, the whole head gradually shrinking until it is no larger than an orange. Every feature, hair, and cicatrice is retained intact, and in some cases even the expression is kept. The heads, thus

perfected, are hung in the smoke of a fire to preserve them from the depredations of the millions of tropical insects which would demolish them if permitted.

The heads are then returned to the victorious warriors, to be hung around the belts as trophies similar to the scalps the North American Indian used as battle standards. Eventually, however, these heads have found their way into curio shops and other places frequented by tourists, who have created a brisk demand for them. An expertly shrunken head, in case you are interested, was obtainable in Panama before the recent war for only \$25, cash American.

It's an art hardly worth learning, cowboy!



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That's how I traded in my "bag of bones" for a barrel of muscle! And I felt so much better, so much on top of the world in my big, new, husky body, that I decided to devote my whole life to helping other fellows change themselves into "perfectly developed men."

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